

Fearless

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Food always had a soft spot for Mako. Now what about food made by Ira Gamagoori for their dinner date? She finds herself loving it more then she thought she would. Maybe that love could help fuel a fire smoldering within her? Who knows, but they both know that to fan said fires, they need just a smudge of fearlessness.

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[Introduction](#)

[The First Date](#)

[The First Response](#)

[A Step Back And Forth](#)

[The Second Date](#)

[The Second Response and Third Date](#)

[One Step Back, Two Steps Forward](#)

[Silent Before The Explosion](#)

[The Last Intermission](#)

[The Fall Of Heroes](#)

[The First Mistakes](#)

[The Ultimate Betrayals](#)

[Why Did It Change?](#)

[Bound to Death til We Part](#)

[Crossing Across Forbidden Lines](#)

The First Date

Another prompt-inspired Iramako fic! There will be copious amounts of fluffiness and awkwardness everywhere! Anime Jesus, I can't get enough of these two nerds.

Prompt: Gamagoori inviting Mako to his place so he can cook her dinner.

"MANKANSHOKU!"

Mako shrieked and jumped in her spot, her lunch nearly toppling to the ground. She grasped her box lunch and replaced the lid back on top before any of her food. She turned around shakily, looking up to see Gamagoori, as predicted from the bellowing yell, behind her looking big and menacing again. She set her box lunch down beside her.

"Y-yes?"

Gamagoori shrank back down to his normal size, letting Mako relax as she feared that she did something wrong and angered him again. His face was still solid, frowning slightly down at her. She didn't move her eyes and patted the concrete beside, offering the open space for Gamagoori to sit. He seemed to look at it for a moment, contemplating whether or not to accept the offer to sit down. Mako patted the spot again, putting as much emotion she could muster into her eyes. Gamagoori started to look unsettled, but it faded as he silently took a seat next to Mako. She looked up at him again, pulling her lunch back on to her lap and opening it.

She started to chow down. She was eating at her usual quick pace when she realized she had yet to offer any to Gamagoori. She stopped eating and offered her extra pair of chopsticks to Gamagoori.

"Do you want some?" she asked. Gamagoori stayed silent, but took the chopsticks nonetheless. He picked up a croquette and examined it curiously, obviously noting the little bone sticking out of it.

"What exactly is in this?" Gamagoori asked. Mako bit into one of the croquettes herself and explained as she chewed.

"It's my mom's famous mystery croquettes. Since we can't get real meat, she puts anything nonpoisonous into it. It actually is really tasty! Try it, try it!" she swallowed her food and popped another one in her mouth, watching Gamagoori as he twisted and turned the croquette around, examining it. After a few more moments of examination, he did bite into the deep-fried food roll and his reaction was obvious. Eyes widened first, then he looked back down at the half-eaten croquette.

"This actually is rather..." he swallowed his mouthful before clearing his throat and continuing, "rather good"

Mako's eyes brightened as Gamagoori wiped crumbs off his face after finishing his croquette, revealing a small smile across his face. He reached over into her bento box and plucked out another croquette and popped it into his mouth, chewing it with a satisfied noise. Mako bounced in her spot.

"I... actually wanted to ask you something, Mankanshoku..." Gamagoori said as he swallowed the croquette. Mako hummed in response as she finished gnawing on her remaining food. She looked at Gamagoori the moment he looked at her. Something shuddered between them, and Gamagoori's face flushed in a red blush.

He cleared his throat, his face still turning bright red. "... Mako. Would you like to come to my home and eat with me?"

Mako blinked a few times, not responding at first. Then it dawned on her what he was asking. A splash of blush lit up her cheeks, and she nervously wiped a hand across the side of her face.

"Are you asking me out on a date?" she asked back, setting her empty bento box to her other side. Gamagoori's blush grew brighter, stretching to his ears. He nodded meekly, his hands nervously twitching at his sides.

"If you do not want to have dinner with me, I shall go-"

"Yes"

"What?"

"I would love to come over and eat! I can teach you how to make my mom's croquettes and we can eat so much since you're a Three-Star! We could eat bento box after bento box, or even try some Tempura shrimp! Ohh, that sounds really good! Tempura shrimp and maybe if you have a grill we could try some Yakiniku using salted pork! We could eat till we're sick!" Mako was on her feet enthusiastically naming off dish after dish to eat. She stopped to collect herself for a moment before looking up at Gamagoori who was hiding behind one hand.

"So when do we go? Can we go soon? Skip the rest of the day?"

"ABSOLUTELY NOT!" Gamagoori shouted, "WE WILL NOT IN ANY CIRCUMSTANCE SKIP SCHOOL!"

"Eep!"

Gamagoori's anger softened as he saw what his shouting did. Mako was now sitting in a defensive pose, hoping that he would not lash out against her for suggesting skipping school. He calmed down and once more reduced size to not freak Mako out anymore. She slowly uncurled and looked up at him as he hovered a hand near her, as if unsure how to touch her or try to get her to relax again. She giggled and took hold of the frozen hand. She didn't interlace their fingers but simply held it. Gamagoori woke up and blushed again, looking at their joined hands.

"So what are you going to do Gamagoori?" Mako asked. Gamagoori audibly swallowed.

"I have a plan already," he answered, getting his hand free of Mako's, "Just go to your locker immediately after school. There will be something there for you that will lead you the rest of the way"

"Is the gift going to be food?" Mako asked. Gamagoori had to suppress a laugh as he shook his head. Mako gave a disappointed 'aww' but smiled nonetheless.

"Okay! Locker after school, look for your gift! I'll see you tonight Gamagoori!" Mako gave him a quick hug before running off just in time to hear the bell ring for the next class. Gamagoori sat there for a few moments, trying to realize what he really had just done. He had done it finally; asked Mako Mankanshoku out and she said yes. Now the hardest steps started.

Getting the date right and not scaring her off.

He got up eventually and started his trek toward Mako's locker. He fingered the objects he would leave in there and tugged them out of his pocket, making sure they were still there and correct. It's going to be okay, Gamagoori told himself, tonight's going to go fine. Mako was a sweet girl with an eye for food and a heart of gold. He was cold, yes, but he was good on the inside.

He just hoped that he wouldn't make a mess of things tonight.

The final siren finally exploded out of the speakers, and Mako was out and running for her locker before students could realize that she was practically running near to Mach 1 to get to her locker. When she saw her locker come into view, she skidded down two hallways and stopped perfectly in front of it until a student at the last moment bumped into her, sending her spiraling through the air and hitting a trash can. She rubbed the blossoming bruise on her head, getting up

and out of the trash can remains and walking up to her locker, putting in the combination and staring at her new additions within it.

A small, blue-wrapped box, a few things that looked like ID cards, and a perfectly folded note. She took the note first and opened it carefully.

'Use the Scan card at the cable car station you used during No Late day to get to my home. The other card is to get you into the Three-Star housing and to me. You can come up at any time. And yes, I have a grill and deep fryer.'

She smiled, jumping on the toes of her feet. This was really going to happen. She put the note in her bag, collected up the ID cards, which had lanyards so she could wear them, and gingerly took the box out. She lifted the lid off and gasped at the contents inside.

It was a cupcake. An actual frosted cupcake. Sweets like this were as rare as getting a One-Star Goku Uniform. It smelled faintly of strawberries. She put the top back on and looked around, hoping no one saw the cupcake. She wouldn't let this out of her sight. She walked cautiously out of the school when it dawned on her the importance of the sweet.

Gamagoori had gone out of his way to get her some of the most rarest things to eat. For *her*.

She couldn't contain her excitement. She rushed her way home, keeping her cherished gift in her hands, the ID cards bouncing against her chest. She nearly dropped the box ten different times and had to fight for it twice (because damn these people in the slums, their noses are sharp as dogs) before she made it home, rushing to her room and fishing for that one dress she remembered she owned.

"Mako, why are you in a rush?" her mother, Sukuyo, asked as she walked in, dodging clothes as Mako threw them as she searched.

"I got asked out on a date! I'm looking for that white dress you bought me!"

"A date? Who's the boy who asked you?" Her mother was right up alongside her, helping her dig through the pile. She pulled the mentioned dress out of the pile and both cheered. Mako started undressing quickly and slipped the dress on over her head.

"I think you've met him. Big, scary, blond hair, wears a Three-Star Goku Uniform!"

"Oh... do you mean Gamagoori?" Her mother sounded suddenly doubtful. She helped Mako smooth out the edges of the dress and handed her the small white slippers to go with it. Mako hopped around as she tugged her shoes off and stepped into the slippers.

"Yup! He asked me out to dinner. He looked cute when he was blushing and he likes your croquettes! Don't think about stopping me, bye mom I'll be back late tonight!"

"Mako, wait-"

Mako was racing out before her mother could give chance. She was too excited to get stopped now. She made sure as she ran that the ID cards were still around her neck, which they were, and checked on her cupcake in the box. It had yet to be ruined. She was breathless as she came into visual range of the cable car station. She took a break even though she should have just gotten to the station and broke into the box and bit into the cupcake.

Strawberry through and through, the cupcake tasted like pure heaven. She moaned as she chewed and swallowed it, loving it all. She only took the one bite and replaced it back in the box, saving the rest for later. She stretched her legs, brushed her dress of any dirt or dust and calmly made her way toward the station. The One-Stars working at the station were alerted to her presence and were ready to strike when she came up to them.

"You know that you can't ride on these. Turn back Mankanshoku"

"Wait! Wait, I have, um... this! I have this from the Disciplinary Committee Chair" she took off the ID for the station and handed it to the One-Star approaching her. The student looked at it for a moment before he looked scared at it. He looked up at her with a flabbergasted expression, and inserted the ID card into his panel, opening the cable car for her. She stood there frozen for a moment before she got in and sat down, watching the door close. The One-Star that had her ID argued with the One-Star operating the cable car for a moment before both started looking scared at a panel to their left. They moved quickly after agreeing on something and started up the station. The ID she gave the One-Star was given back to her.

"You have the necessary ID to get in?" the guard asked. Mako rose the other ID and was returned a nod before the cable car started to ascend up the town. Mako sat back, stretching out on the comfortable seats. She adjusted her dress to make sure she wasn't flashing and let herself relax before becoming flustered.

She was on a date. She was going to be on a date with Gamagoori. He's going to be cooking for her!

"Entrance denied. Identification Card required" an automated voice droned at her. She sat up, tugging her other ID from around her neck. She noticed that she was at the station at the Academy, and the open hatch outside the door was blinking. She inserted the card into it and watched lights flash green before the card popped out again and the cable car was on the move. It was moving alongside the Academy until it stopped at an alcove behind the main building, revealing a plaza with five different entrances. Mako assumed that each was to the Elite Fours and Satsuki's homes. The cable car opened at the plaza and Mako stepped out, albeit scared and curious. Not a sound came from anywhere in the area, and Mako was left to figure out which one was Gamagoori's entrance. She simply stood in the middle, turning this way and that way, trying to decide which lift to try.

One of the lifts opened its doors and out came Gamagoori dressed in casual attire. In a tight short-sleeve shirt and black slacks, Mako never thought she would see brighter light than around Satsuki and Ragyo.

"Lost, Mankanshoku?" He asked with a knowing smile. He obviously saw what she was wearing, seeing that his cheeks were a light pink. Mako blushed herself as she ran up to him, hugging her box to her chest.

"Thank you for the cupcake by the way Gamagoori"

Gamagoori rubbed the back of his head. "It was nothing. Come on, I started preparing dinner"

"Yay! Food made by Gamagoori!"

Gamagoori's cooking skills were amazing, Mako admitted as she bit into one of the most deliciously cooked and seasoned Yakiniku she had ever had the honor in eating. After shoving two more pieces into her mouth, she shoveled a few bites of rice into her mouth until her cheeks were like a squirrel with nuts in its mouth. She chewed happily and looked over at Gamagoori.

"You really shouldn't shove that much food in your mouth Mankanshoku!" he firmly said, putting two pieces of meat in his mouth before taking in rice and chewing.

"But it's good" Mako responded, coming out completely muffled by the food in her mouth. She swallowed it all down and gladly took more, chewing and swallowing before shoveling more rice into her mouth. She smiled at him, showing that she did listen to him. He laughed softly and stood up, going around the island they sat at and turned the grill built in off. He covered it and placed what looked like wet putty on the wood block.

"Would you, hm, like to make mochi ice cream with me?"

Mako's eyes lit up and she was quickly rushing to his freezer to grab the ice cream filling. Gamagoori and Mako had a fun time trying to make it right, which included a messy incident where Mako accidentally sprayed Gamagoori with ice cream. He didn't get as mad as you would think but he was laughing as they tried to clean up and start over again. The next try was going great until Mako decided to throw mochi around, hitting Gamagoori again. This time Gamagoori responded by throwing some of his own mochi at her, getting it stuck in her hair. After some tears and a bit of work trying to pull the sticky ball of pounded sticky rice out of her hair without cutting it out, they were back at it again and finally completed a full plate of vanilla and green tea mochi.

"Woohoo! Desert! It smells delicious..." Mako sighed, sticking her nose near a green tea mochi. Gamagoori grabbed a vanilla one and chomped down on it, staying silent and savoring the soft taste of the mochi and ice cream. Mako immediately swallowed two green tea ones and while she was chewing grabbed for a third, just at the same time Gamagoori for reaching it. They both grabbed it at and looked at each other. Mako swallowed her previously eaten mochi ice cream and went to bite into her grabbed one. Gamagoori had a similar thought and went in for it.

It ended up with their mouths comped down on opposite ends of the small treat. Gamagoori froze as he realized what was happening, but couldn't free his mouth from the sticky, semi-frozen treat. Mako's eyes crinkled at the ends as she chomped through the treat once, getting their mouths closer. She did once, twice more until he could feel the air being blown out of her nose. He bit into the treat a bit and moved less than an inch closer, but now their noses were touching. Gamagoori's heart sped up. Both their faces had splashes of blush on them. Mako closed her eyes as she it into the treat again, getting closer. Their noses slid together. Gamagoori was getting closer too.

When the mochi disappeared and their lips suddenly touched, Gamagoori didn't know how to react. He initially pulled away but Mako's lips seemed to seek his out until they were firmly on his. Her

eyes kept closed, but Gamagoori's were wide open. They didn't close even when they pulled apart. Gamagoori closed his eyes, however, when Mako opened hers. She didn't see his brow wrinkle up as she started to freak out.

"I'm sorry Gamagoori I didn't mean to kiss you, I just couldn't stop because your lips were soft and the butterflies in my stomach wouldn't go away and I'm sorry if I made you angry don't yell at-"

Gamagoori effortlessly moved up to Mako and took her by the lips soundlessly. Mako made a surprised noise before she sank into it, eyes closing, sighing into it, the edges of her lips curling into a smile. Mako pulled away thought after a short bit, giggling as she watched Gamagoori's face grow brighter.

"I really like you Gamagoori. Can we do this again?"

Gamagoori gave a funny looking smile. He took hold of Mako's hands with a shaky breath.

"I-If you want to Mako, then yes. Yes we can go out again"

The First Response

Mako silently went over the events of the night like a flashback as she walked home from the cable car.

Watching and helping Gamagoori cook, eating his really well done food, making dessert mochi ice cream with him, the mochi fight...

Her first kiss. Her first kisses. She had given her first kisses to Gamagoori, and she did not regret a single one. Not even the cute little chaste ones she stole on their ride back to the cable car station.

She hid into her hands, stopping for a moment. She still couldn't get the buzz from the kisses to fade, and her stomach still danced from the feelings in boastful leaps. She had kissed him! He had kissed her!

She sighed blissfully and continued to walk, trying to brace the cold as it swept over her with the wind. She really should have brought a jacket, or borrowed something from Gamagoori. It got worse as she noticed that it had begun to rain, and it was coming down in sheets. Not a spot in the area was spared from the downpour. She was getting wet quickly, and she knew she would be nearly soaked through before she got home. She rushed through the soaked street until she spotted a dry spot, underneath a hanging near a store back entrance, besides some of the public dumpsters for the slums. She gladly would take the smell of garbage for being able to be dry. She stepped into the dry patch, trying to wring out the water in her hair. She was soaked already, her dress not helping her situation. It was white, so what happened when white things got wet?

If anyone came around her, she would be showing all skin and undergarments. Her tan bra and panties were stark against her white skin, her dress already sticking to her skin. She tried to squeeze some water out of the dress, but it did not give much. It absorbed most of it, making it a sticky, see-through mess. She shuddered as

chills took hold of her, and she curled up in a ball, pressing her back firmly against the dumpster. She was freezing cold, and the wind still hitting her did no justice to her situation.

If only he had come out of the cable car, Mako thought, I wouldn't be here getting sick and wet and tired...

"Mankanshoku!"

She looked around the dumpster, careful of the rain pouring down a foot from her dry spot as she saw his large shadow of Gamagoori running toward her, using his arms to shield himself from the rain. She had to laugh; he had the most dramatic timing.

"Mankanshoku!"

"Gamagoori, over here!" she cried. She did stand and wave for him, but hid behind the dumpster. Her dress was still see through thanks to the rain. He walked up to her, but noticed instantly that she was hiding behind the dumpster, out of view.

"What's wrong, did something happen?"

"The rain happened!" she exclaimed, poking her head out farther. "My dress is white and it's down pouring so it's stuck to me and it's see through now and you could see my underwear and things; hey, do you have a coat I could borrow?"

Gamagoori's face lit up in red the moment she mentioned her dress was now see through. He looked at her for a moment, watching with a tense expression as she slowly slid out of the shadow of the dumpster, revealing that her dress was indeed see through. He immediately shrugged off his jacket and wrapped it around Mako. The long jacket covered her down to her knees, wrapping her in heavy warmth. Emblazoned with the Three Stars known on his Goku Uniform and striped with yellow, Gamagoori's jacket was the one thing Mako needed most right then. She snaked her arms into the

sleeves, although they were huge on her, and waved them, watching them act like wings.

"Are you sure I can use this? You could get sick too if you don't wear a jacket! And when your sick, you're miserable especially if you get a cold! Gamagoori, you should have brought a second one so you could lessen the risks of getting sick! Now you're all wet and soaked, and you're smiling- wait, why are you smiling? You're going to get sick!"

He really was smiling; not full-out grinning, but one of those lopsided smiles that made Mako's heart flutter nonetheless. He tugged the collar of the jacket, flipping it up so it covered Mako's neck.

"So I get sick. Your health now matters more. Is the jacket okay? I realize that a hood or an umbrella would be better, but the jacket is an excellent wind breaker so the wind won't add to the cold"

Mako dug her chin into the upturned collar, suddenly blushing as Gamagoori's blush doubled in size and brightness alongside her.

"The jacket's perfect Gamagoori. Thank you" Mako thanked him, smiling from ear to ear. She grabbed the collar with both hands and lifted it higher, hoping to hide behind it. Gamagoori's smile faded, but he seemed content enough to give another one quickly before stepping to the side and offering one of his hands to her.

"The least I can do is walk with you back to your home for making you walk in the rain alone"

"G-Gamagoori... when did you start being so chivalrous?"

"It's called being courteous, Mankanshoku. Now come on, before this storm gets worse and we're stranded here"

The walk back to her home was silent besides the sound of rain hitting metal rooftops and various items being tossed in the wind.

Mako ducked into the jacket collar once more as the wind whipped at them relentlessly, rain now coming at them from the side. Gamagoori covered his face as the next sheet came at them, but he still was soaked from the neck down. Really, he was just soaked by the rain, the storm giving no free dry passes from its torrent of water. Mako stuck to his side through the entire thing, asking him every time they stopped for a moment when the storm was too much to walk in if he wanted his coat back, but he kindly rejected, claiming that he was fine. Although it was obvious he was wet and probably cold, he did not show it. His shivering made Mako doubt he was okay, but she respected his word on his condition. They continued on until the rain and the storm passed and now left with little sprinkling rain.

"There, there it is!" Mako pointed down the alleyway to their right, a meager wood house with a lit up neon sign proclaiming 'Back-Alley Doctor Mankanshoku' sitting at the end. Gamagoori gave a disappointed sigh.

"This?"

"Yep! We're in the slums, we don't have all the fancy stuff the One, Two, and you Elite Three Stars have! We have the dark, dumped stuff, but we make it work! Yeah, it's small and sitting in the dark but we have food, we have electricity, heat, beds, all the essentials! We have a roof over our head! Some of the others aren't so lucky! Plus my family makes the house amazing with the smell of nonpoisonous croquettes and family fun"

Gamagoori's disappointment fell away. Her defense on her family, on her little shack of a home, came with no break, and with impressive spirit as she always brought. He should have figured that she was comfortable down in the slums, seeing that she lived her for most of her life.

"Come on! Can you stay for a little to say hi to my family?"

The color drained from Gamagoori's face.

"I... I can not, Mankanshoku. I have business I must take to before the school day tomorrow"

Mako slumped in disappointment. "Awwwww... can't paperwork wait?"

"We both know that waiting on it can cause trouble"

The silent agreement to not speak of the Club incident passed through them both. While Mako was proud of her devotion and skill in the field of keeping a club going and keeping up with paperwork, the effect of attacking Ryuuko and having it take control of her was not a good feeling. Gamagoori had a similar insight on the event, and they seemed to silently agree not to speak of it unless worse came to disastrous.

"Okaaaay..." Mako murmured, obviously saddened that he could not stay. Gamagoori sighed and kissed the top of her head, rubbing her head afterward.

"I'm sorry but I will make it up to you"

"Afterschool?!" She jumped up into his face, close enough to simply stand higher on her toes and kiss him. Gamagoori jumped back a bit, clearing his throat as his face took a bright blush.

"S-sure. We can..."

"Go on that second date you promised?" she led the sentence on. Gamagoori nodded meekly. Mako smiled brightly and jumped for a hug, which Gamagoori didn't catch at first. As Mako slid down with a squeak, he finally woke up from his flustered nap and hugged Mako tight and close. She giggled into his chest for a moment before stepping out of his arms. She bowed quickly.

"Thank you Gamagoori for walking me home and... and thank you for the amazing date"

Gamagoori's small smile returned. He slowly motioned to her hand and brushed his fingers against hers, getting a response quickly as she held his hand, her fingers digging in his palm until their fingers were interlaced at their sides.

"You're welcome Mako... I am glad that I didn't mess our date up"

"You wouldn't have messed it up anyway! Goodbye Gamagoori!" She stood up on her tiptoes and puckered her lips, waiting for Gamagoori to move. He was embarrassed as hell but he met her half way with a kiss on her cheek. As he drew away, Mako made a split second jump towards him and kissed him on the lips, cutting any further motion from him. His whole face went red for a moment until he relaxed into it and kissed her back. They drew away after a minute of blissful kissing silence. Mako stepped back, letting go of his hand and ran for home, waving and yelling goodbye to him as she went. He waved and called his own goodbyes before turning and walking back toward the cable car station. Mako silently crept up to her front door and opened it as silently as she could, but it still made some noise. She tiptoed passed the kitchen and into the living room, looking into their bedroom and finding everyone asleep, curled up under their blankets.

She was safe. She started pulling Gamagoori's jacket off...

She forgot to give it back to him! It was too late, she reasoned, putting the big coat against her school bag temporarily, she could give it back to him tomorrow. She shed her soaked dress and tossed it into the hamper to be washed. She then silently tugged the coat back on and walked into their dressing room and closed the door behind her, only to shriek and jump when she turned around.

Ryuuko and Sukuyo stood there waiting for her with arms crossed, hips cocked to the left, the whole nine yards. They knew where she had been, and they caught her red-handed in the ending walk home. And they obviously, oh so obviously, wanted answers as to what happened.

"H-hi mom, Ryuuko..." Mako squeaked. Ryuuko and Sukuyo squinted their eyes.

"So..." Ryuuko started to say, "How did the 'date' go?"

Mako sighed deeply and leaned against the door. She was getting flustered again as she was subjugated under the gaze of her mother and best friend. She looked up from the cover of her bangs coyly, trying to avoid the heated gaze of her audience.

"My date with... Gamagoori went fantastic"

"Gamagoori?" Ryuuko exclaimed, "you were asked out by Gamagoori?"

"I forgot to mention that didn't I?" Sukuyo murmured. Ryuuko turned to her to rant, but knew not to. She looked back at Mako.

"Well?! How did it go? Did he do anything to you?" Ryuuko asked. Mako smiled, relaxing. She jumped up in the air and hugged both of them.

"It was a perfect date! He was all flustered most of the time but he was nice and soft-spoken and chivalrous; look, he gave me with big jacket so I didn't get so wet when he walked me home!" she pulled at the jacket covering her, "It was amazing and he really isn't all screaming and loyalty unyielding to Lady Satsuki"

"He really let you use this? It's so soft!" Sukuyo exclaimed, running her hands over one of the sleeves, "This must be worth a fortune, I mean it must be made from top line materials!"

"It can't be that soft... that really is soft..." Ryuuko said as she touched the jacket. Mako beamed from the cover of the upturned collar.

"He didn't even ask for it back when we parted. I'll return it tomorrow at school. Do you want to hear about the date?"

"Of course!" Ryuuko and Sukuyo cheered, Ryuuko more desperate while Sukuyo rather ecstatic.

The game of 20 questions about Mako's date began.

"What kind of date was it Mako?" Sukuyo asked.

"A dinner date, at his place!"

"You actually got to go into Three-Star homes? Like where Eyebrows and all the Elite live?" Ryuuko's questioned. Mako vigorously nodded.

"Yeah! The cable cars can go to the back of the academy, um mostly to the tower, and it dropped me off in this huge plaza thing where there were lifts for everyone's place! It was confusing because they aren't really labelled but Gamagoori came from his lift and helped me!"

"He seems really like a gentlemen" Sukuyo stated. Mako agreed with a nod.

"Alright, alright... how did he ask you out?" Ryuuko asked.

"He actually approached me during lunch today! You were busy with Mikisugi so I ate alone. He was intimidating at first but he asked me out after eating some of your food mom! He likes your croquettes!"

"One way to get a man to talk is through his stomach"

"So he asked you out... by just asking you?" Confusion took to Ryuuko's features. Mako poked at her cheek before continuing on with her explanation.

"He did, sort of... he said to go to my locker after school, which I did! In my locker was these two key cards, which get me to his house," she rose the lanyards and their cards. Both shined thanks to the light of the moon now showing through the window from its hidden place behind rain clouds.

"And... this" Mako pulled the small box from earlier out of the jacket, presenting it in both of her hands. Ryuuko and Sukuyo zoomed in on it as Mako opened the top and pulled out the bitten cupcake.

"It's a cupcake!"

"Oh my god, a cupcake"

"He got me a cupcake!" Mako exclaimed, "I started to eat it before I got to his place"

All three of them inhaled deeply to take in the soft strawberry smell coming from the sweet treat. Before anyone could chomp on it, Mako put it back into its box and sealed it again. Mako set it down on the table in the room and sat down, folding her legs underneath her. Ryuuko and Sukuyo came to surround her quickly, hands holding their chins, invested in the details of Mako's date.

"So... what happened after the locker gifts, the cable car trip and the lift thing?" Sukuyo asked, giving a hand signal for continuation.

"Well, when I actually got into his house, he was starting to cook-"

"Woah, he actually cooked for you? He didn't order takeout, didn't have pre-made microwave crap, or stuff made by the other Elite Four?" Ryuuko butted in. Mako shook her head furiously.

"Not a single bit of help besides my own! We worked together when he needed help with things that were too small or too complicated!"

"Seems out of character for him..." Ryuuko mumbled. Sukuyo smiled, hugging Mako.

"That's my daughter! Now what happened next, what happened?"

Mako hummed thoughtfully, tapping an index finger on her chin. "Well, we ate dinner and it really was amazing~ Real meat and it was pure *heaven*... uh, but then after we made mochi ice cream together!"

"Mochi ice cream?" Sukuyo asked.

"Yep! We basically got into a mochi fight! We threw it at each other and sprayed each other with ice cream and one time mochi got stuck in my hair but he got it out! We went through a lot of ice cream and mochi before we finished and got to eat some and then he..."

"He... what?" Ryuuko asked. Sukuyo nodded alongside Ryuuko, sitting on her knees and leaning closer, wanting to know.

"He... we fought over one and we... well, I did but he did it back and..." Mako looked away from them, blushing. Her audience grew closer and closer, the apprehension obviously killing them.

"What did you guys do?!" Ryuuko and Sukuyo demanded loudly, loud enough to stir awake Mataro and Barazo, who poked their heads into the room with sleepy looks. Guts came up quickly as well, sitting on Mataro's head with one eye open.

"What's going on?" Mataro asked, rubbing one eye with the back of his hand. Mako did not hear or see them and instead answered Ryuuko and Sukuyo's question in a soft voice, but it was loud enough for everyone to hear.

"Gamagoori and I kissed"

...

"WHAT?!"

"WHAT THE HELL?!"

"SIS, WHO THE HELL IS HE?!"

"WHO HAS GONE TO KISS TO MY DAUGHTER WITHOUT PERMISSION?!"

"Dad, Mataro, what are you doing up?!"

"WHO IS THIS GAMAGOORI GUY?!"

"Dad, it's okay, it's okay! You've met him, remember?! Big blond, three-star, defends Lady Satsuki?"

"HE HAS SOMETHING COMING TO HIM NOW!"

"Dad, leave him alone! All we did was go on a date and kiss a lot-"

"HOW MUCH SIS?!"

"MATARO!"

"... did we start something, Ms. Mankanshoku, that we can't stop?"

"I believe so, but we can stall it if you can help knock Mataro out"

"... deal"

"DAD DON'T GO OUT IT DARK OUTSIDE AND ITS STILL RAINING! HE'S LEFT ALREADY- MOM! RYUUKO! HELP ME!"

"Honey, it's too late to go hitting Mako's date! Get back in here!"

"I WILL NOT!"

"DAAAAAAAAAD, LET ME EXPLAIN PLEASE! You wouldn't be able to hurt him anyway, he's way bigger than all of us! Dad, Mom's throwing away the deep fryer..."

"SUKUYO! DO NOT THROW AWAY THE FRYER"

"Get back inside then! Let Mako explain her case before you go trying to perform evasive surgeries on her boyfriend!"

"He's not- well... he's, um..."

"Mako... just admit it already"

"Ryuuko, you betrayer!"

"Mako..."

Mako threw her hands up, calling out for silence and open ears. Her family stilled and made their way around her to let her speak. She brushed off Guts as he tried to climb up her leg

"Okay, okay! Gamagoori and I really like each other and we're going out again tomorrow and we've admitted we both like each other and we've kissed and I really do like him... okay, yes I consider him my boyfriend is that so bad; no it isn't please don't go after him he could be sick because he sacrificed his only jacket so I didn't get sick walking home in my dress... plus he's really considerate about me and what I want to do and he's careful and he obviously isn't faking this and I really hope you understand why I like him..."

Mako snuggled into the jacket before plopping down on her butt in the middle of the family circle, digging her chin into the collar. Her face heated up softly, her cheeks gathering color as her announcement settled in her family. Sukuyo and Ryuuko exchanged impressed looks, approving her and her relationship. Mako calmed a least a bit, knowing that the girls of the house were okay with it. She had a feeling that her mother would be okay with it, she was just nervous about Ryuuko's reaction to dating the Elite who was rather rough on both. Her brother was slowly nodding, the information processing quickly until he jumped up.

"Alright! I'll support you sis! But if he tries to do anything against your wishes I'll have my gang come after him!"

"Mataro, you've met him... he's bigger than all of us. He'll just drop-kick you and your friends into the harbor if you mess with him..."

Mako told him. Mataro sank down back on her butt, looking a little frightened at the thought of being drop-kicked all the way into the harbor. Sukuyo rubbed his head and told him to relax, telling him that Gamagoori would only do so if he continued to try to steal. Then all

heads turned to Barazo, who sat with his chin in his hand, obviously still contemplating his decision.

"... Dad?" Mako said, waving her hand near him, the long sleeve flapping around.

"... Alright. I'll accept the fact that you're dating him"

"Really?!"

"Of course! He's obviously made you happy, which is fine for me as long as you're happy"

Mako accepted the open arms of her father, falling into him for the hug he offered. "Thank you, thank you, thank you!"

"Well!" Ryuuko said as she stretched, yawning loudly, "That wrapped up well!"

"Yep!" Mako cheered, jumping out of her father arms. The jacket had moved from its spot and Mako's undergarments were on display for her family. She quickly covered, rushed for her nightgown, threw it on, set Gamagoori's jacket down near her school bag and jumped for her bed.

"Time for sleep!" was her last cry as she rolled into her spot.

"Mako, stop doing that!" Ryuuko yelled as she walked into the room, followed by Mataro yawning loudly, and Sukuyo and Barazo softly talking, smiling widely as they closed the screen door and settled into bed for the night again. Mako watched them from behind nearly closed eyes, hearing their snores and soft breathing before she submitted to her drowsiness.

She could see the bumpy shadow of Gamagoori's jacket through the screen. When she let her eyelids fall, she could see his smiling face in the darkness around her.

She couldn't wait for tomorrow morning to come.

A Step Back And Forth

Gamagoori winced as sunlight poured in from outside, bathing his face and bed with the light of morning. It was already morning, yet for him it still felt like the middle of the night. Maybe because he had spent most of his night tossing and turning with the memories of his date with Mankanshoku. It did not matter though as the sun's rays continued to hit his eyes without remorse and he was really not in the mood with being blinded by the huge burning ball. He groaned softly as he rose out of the cocoon of warmth he had created and rubbed at his droopy eyes. He still felt heavy and tired, which he knew was a sign that he was sick. He could feel it in the heaviness of his face and sinuses, the fact that his forehead softly burned under the neutral temperature of his hand. He must have gotten sick when he walked her home last night, foolishly forgetting to take an extra jacket to protect himself once he handed off his original. He ran his hands through his hair, the sickly warmth from his head not helping him to move; it actually made him just want to lay back down and sleep his illness away. He knew he could not do so, so he dragged himself to the side of his bed, and sat there with his burning head in his hands, groaning as his equilibrium flipped flopped around for a moment, making him sway softly.

He really hated it when he got sick; it always seemed to knock him down and out, no matter what it was. Especially a cold; they always bedded him down, with his mom at his side with ice, cold water, easy-to-swallow medicine and a doctor's note for a day's good rest.

His mother was not here to help him, and he had an entire committee to run and coordinate, not to mention he had classes to attend and strategy meetings with Lady Satsuki and the rest of the Elite Four to complete.

He slowly stood up, adjusting his silk pajama pants as his equilibrium settled back to normal. He shuffled into his bathroom and turned his sink faucet on and looked into the mirror above it.

It was over obvious that he had a bad cold. His face looked swollen and puffy around his sinuses, his nose and cheeks a bright scarlet red. He was flushed down to his neck, patches of said flush across his shoulders and chest. He looked like he had been slapped for no apparent reason, giving him an obvious not-so-good look. He checked his forehead again with the back of his hand, brushing back his unruly hair. Still feverish, and it felt like it was slowly getting higher and higher. The wave of dizziness wasn't a good sign either. He took hold of the sides of his sink, leaning forward as the dizziness scrambled his stomach, nausea quickly replacing the waves of instability. They settled after a long, tense moment of internal battles, but Gamagoori knew his body and whatever sickness he had all too well; it was a war until he was well again.

He took heavy gasping intakes of air as he felt his stomach slowly settle back to normal. This wasn't good, not at all. The last thing he needed to happen to him was to outright vomit during any of his classes or even during his scheduled Disciplinary Committee meeting. Or worse, the strategy meeting. Showing insolence by not taking care of himself and puking in front of Lady Satsuki would be horrific and dishonorable, and giving fuel for countless pips and snark from Nonon and Inumuta, and lets not mention the amount of crap he would take from Sanageyama for not just hunkering down with his illness would just ignite an unneeded amount of stress and self-consciousness...

He would stay home and alert them of his illness, he ultimately decided. He turned his sink off and looked once more at his reflection. Still looking like crap but now he was sweating badly, his fever and condition hitting a stride. He wiped his forehead and slowly made his way out of the bathroom, stopping for a moment in the threshold of the door to settle sudden nausea hitting him. His vision swam and his feet shuffled even as he stood still. Not good, not good at all.

He shuffled to his bed and flopped unceremoniously on to his bed. He threw his covers haphazardly over his shivering frame, crammed

a pillow under his head and grabbed another and plopped it over his head to block out the invading light from outside. He groaned as the pillow didn't block it out enough, light scrambling through every crack or open space to hit some part of his face even an inch.

"Shutters, dim to five percent" he groggily ordered, gripping the pillow on his head tight. The smart shutters carried out his orders to the T, dimming until his room was almost pitch black once more. He sighed in relief, moving the pillow from atop his head to his arms, tucking his face into it. His face appreciated the softness of the pillow while his face thanked it for being chilled and cool compared to the searing heat of his feverish forehead. He sighed once again in bliss as he enveloped his face into his pillows. The combination of numbness of his hot face and the cooling effects of his pillows lulled him into a much-needed mental rest.

He felt like he was forgetting something, something important. He knew he had to alert Lady Satsuki of his ailment and his decision to stay home to nurse himself back to good health. What was he forgetting... why was his thoughts so sluggish?

A pair of wide brown eyes appeared in his thoughts, followed by a caress of a memory involving a kiss... and a confession, a date, a girl name Mako...

MAKO! Oh in all that is high and mighty, that's what he forgot! He was supposed to make up not staying at her home with a date after classes today! How was he going to make this up if he told her he was sick? Would she ever consider dating him again? Would she be mad that he had to call it off, or would she rush over here to take care of him? No, she wouldn't think of coming over to take care of his sick butt; she has school to focus on, and that wasn't even adding in Matoi's part in her normal routine, whatever it was. Why was he negatively thinking at all about her, she's a-

"Oi, Toad, you awake! School's about to start!"

Oh... no, please don't be who it is...

"Jakuzure, keep it down. He statistically would be sleeping and we all know what happens when you prematurely wake Gamagoori up"

"Good, he needs to get up nice and angry; he actually could be late for once! Imagine it, him late and freaking out as he rushes through all his classes like a No-Star who forgot the sirens already happened"

"Or he could be gone and we missed him walking into school"

"How could you miss a mountain moving? Are you that blind or that deaf?"

"Maybe you're that short?"

"Shut up"

It really was Nonon, and she wasn't alone. He recognized Inumuta's voice alongside Nonon's snark-filled voice as they roamed his home. He groaned softly and curled up, pulling his blanket up to his shoulders. He was freezing for some reason, shaking and shivering hard. He pressed his face into his pillows. Why couldn't they be warm right now? The footsteps of his two intruders were coming closer, and their voices rang louder and louder in his foggy head, making his head pound. He was groggy and sleepy, and he tiptoed between sleep and painful alertness. He could hear them shuffle near his door. He just hoped that he could disappear into the bed and get some sleep to help his body get better. Their whispers ceased and the door creaked open, light streaming right into his face. He groaned and flopped over to his other side, hiding from the invading brightness.

"Gamagoori, get up" Nonon spat. She got a weak 'go away' in response from the dark human shape on the bed in front of them. Inumuta and Nonon exchanged nervous glances before stepping in farther to the room.

"Are you okay, you're usually already in the tower-"

They saw the shape of a pillow plop on top of what they suspected was Gamagoori's head. Nonon's patience started to dwindle, anger simmering under her skin. Inumuta simply side-stepped as Nonon stamped down a foot impatiently.

"Come on, toad. It's time to get up"

"Go away, Jakuzure" Gamagoori mumbled again, shuffling as he rose his arms and moved the pillow on top of him.

"So you want to be late to class?" Nonon demanded.

...

"... you're sick, aren't you?" Inumuta asked before Nonon could ask something different.

"Took ya' long enough to figure it out" Gamagoori bit out before turning once again, facing the intruders. "Now go away"

"What in the world could have gotten you sick? Did you go outside last night?" Nonon asked, something creeping into her voice; something devious.

Gamagoori rolled over again, refusing to answer. Inumuta's snort answered the question.

"And why oh why would you be going outside? You must have walked someo-"

Suddenly there was a pillow flying toward them, and Nonon barely had enough time to dodge it before it flew just over her head and assaulted the door, giving a huge explosion of sound from the impact and a hole in said thrown projectile. Nonon and Inumuta scrambled out before another could be thrown at them and possibly kill them. Gamagoori dropped his arm as silence returned to his home, and he groaned as his sinuses grew heavy and he dropped his head to the

pillows and was out into dreamland instantly. Mako was in his dreams as they began.

Somewhere, outside of his sick, muddled mind, he hoped that Mako would be accepting about his condition.

Mako gave a soft sigh. No sign of Gamagoori yet, and lunch was about to begin. She pouted as she splayed herself on top of her desk, kicking her legs softly underneath it. It seemed like he was avoiding her, or simply was not here today. Ryuuko had assured her that she would look for him and ask about his whereabouts but she still was upset. He wasn't here. He could have just as easily moved on already and he may have actually lied about liking her...

"Mako Mankanshoku"

Mako raised her head along with the rest of the dozing class. Chairs scrapped sharply against the floor as they all saw who was in the doorway, and Mako did the same, nearly throwing her bag and her desk to the floor. Students that were once asleep were up on their feet, even the teacher was, saluting and bowing to their guest.

Lady Satsuki had graced them with her appearance. And she was looking directly at Mako.

"Mankanshoku"

"Y-yes!" Mako stood up from her bow. She could see something in Satsuki's face soften and she waved for her to follow her. The class couldn't believe that Satsuki would call for the mid-class sleeper to follow her. Mako grabbed her bag and quickly followed Satsuki out of the class and into the hall as the class exploded into talk about the visit. She walked nervously alongside Satsuki until she could see what looked like a smile on Satsuki's face, and she turned to speak to Mako.

"I have some news on Gamagoori, if you would like to know" Satsuki said, looking toward Mako as she jumped.

"Gamagoori?! B-but how did you-"

"He came to me before he asked you out, desperate for help. He had no clue how to do such and so he found solace in my advice. I see no issue with this as well. You obviously make him happy, and he obviously holds you in a high regard. And besides, I've been waiting for the day he would admit his feelings. It was almost to obvious how he felt about you"

"Lady Satsuki... thank you" Mako bowed softly before a smile broke out on her face and she relaxed, realizing that she did not have to worry about being enemies with Lady Satsuki, at least in the front involving Gamagoori.

"What's happened to him?" Mako asked. Satsuki didn't break her stride as they walked up a flight of stairs, talking as she went.

"It seems he's sick. Jakuzure and Inumuta went to see if he had arrived and found him huddled in his bed without a single light on or window open"

"Sick?!" Mako suddenly felt at fault. She was most likely the reason he was sick. Feeling guilt, she froze as they reached the top of the stairs, halting their walk.

"It's my fault..."

"Well... you can go over to his home and help him through it"

Mako looked up at Satsuki with a bewildered expression, "You mean I can go see him?! Right now!?"

"You have his jacket still to return, correct?" Satsuki said with a soft smirk. Mako tugged open her bag and showed Satsuki the collar of the jacket shoved within it and closed the bag up.

"Yep! He deserves it back! Oh... wait, I've never been on this level of the school?!"

"Just head down the hall, Mankanshoku. You'll reach the lifts"
Satsuki murmured to her before descending down the stairs again, leaving Mako in the locked fourth level of the Academy, reserved for the use of the Two and Three-Stars and those students with special jurisdiction to enter it. Mako immediately yelled her thanks before rushing down the hall, clutching her bag to her chest for dear life. Satsuki found herself smiling as she walked calmly back to her class, noticeably earning gasps as the student body president moved through the crowds of One and No Star students heading to their next class.

"As I thought... their likeness is almost too obvious.."

"Gamagoori?! Gamagoori, are you okay?!"

He slowly opened his eyes, fighting the heavy lids as they started to droop once more. That voice...

"Gamagoori!"

Mako?

"Oh, right he's sick um..." he could hear her talk softly, trying to keep quiet from the other side of his closed door, "Are you okay, Gamagoori?"

It had to be Mako. At least, it was the closest guess his muddled brain could give right away. He sat up with a groan, rubbing at his heated forehead. It still burned under his touch and now his head swam as a dizzy spell washed over him. Damn colds and their effect on his sinuses.

"You can come in, Mankanshoku" he said before he flopped back into his bed, curling up within his blankets like a child. He could see

the door slowly creak open, a softer beam of light streaming into the dark room. Mako's small figure stood shadowed in the light, her brown eyes somehow shining through the blackness.

"Gamagoori?" her voice was definitely softer, more cautious. She seemed to obviously know he was sick as a dog. She stepped into the room, obviously eyeing his large shadowed frame as he looked at her from behind the cover of his blankets, his already hot face growing hotter. Mako was suddenly at his bedside, looking at him sadly. She extended out a hand and took hold of his exposed left hand, squeezing it gently. Small tears gathered in the corners of her eyes.

"I'm sorry I got you sick..." she apologized, a few tears slipping down her face. Gamagoori's eyes widened, his senses suddenly alert and awake. He couldn't let this continue. He didn't like it that Mako was crying.

"It's... it's not your fault" he murmured, squeezing her hand back. Her head lowered.

"It's my fault! If I hadn't forgotten to get a coat-"

"It's my fault, Mankanshoku," Gamagoori pleaded, "because I was a lousy date and let you walk out in the rain"

Mako wiped at her tears, smiling softly. "You're not a lousy date. You're an amazing one! You were nice and kind and a gentleman!"

"M-Mankanshoku..."

"And now that you've done something for me, its high time that I did something for you! Now lay on your back! I'll be right back!" Mako presses a soft kiss to his forehead before rushing off out of the room, rattling off items he assumed were to help him. Gamagoori did as he was asked, laying his back, looking up at the ceiling. The feeling of heaviness lessened, his sinuses relaxing enough for him to be semi-comfortable. He released a long-winded breath. He had not

expected Mako to get wind of his condition. He could hear things falling in the distance, but his anger did not flare like it usually would. He simply felt peaceful; it could have easily been his fever taking over him, but it didn't seem to matter to him right now. The door was opened again and Mako was beside him once more, wringing out a towel for a moment before gently placing the soaked towel on his forehead. Gamagoori's head inclined upward, sighing in relief as the cold battled his high fever.

"It's okay, Gamagoori. I'm a doctor's daughter! Now open!" Mako raised up a thermometer, and placed it under Gamagoori's tongue, "Hold it there!"

Gamagoori focused on keeping the thermometer under his tongue. His head was starting to spin again, and he closed his eyes to try to keep the spinning at bay. Mako saw the sudden concentration he was putting into it and softly tapped his temple, getting him to open his eyes.

"Are you okay? Is something happening?" Mako asked, pulling the thermometer out and looking at the temperature. Her eyes widened for a moment before she set it down and lifted up his towel, pressing the back of her hand to his forehead. His head inclined again to get closer to Mako's hand. Mako smiled as she watched him, taking back her hand and setting the towel back in place.

"High fever, obvious sinus issues, dizziness... Grade A cold! Strong, a little different, but not Mako resistant! Don't worry, Gamagoori! If anyone can help you beat this cold, it's Mako!"

Gamagoori smiled. Mako returned on and held his hand again, shaking it.

"We can go on that second date when you're back on your feet, okay?" Mako asked, squeezing his hand. He squeezed it back, closing his suddenly heavy eyes for a moment. He opened them again and nodded at her.

"Alright"

"Okay! Now do you have any medicine here? Specifically cold medicine?"

Gamagoori shook his head. Mako pouted, standing up and grabbing for her bag.

"Then I need to go out and get some! You need some sort of medicine to help combat it! Leave it to me! I may be gone for a bit, so try to catch some shut-eye!"

Mako did not immediately leave. She calmly got up on the bed alongside Gamagoori and planted a long kiss on his forehead. Gamagoori's face, even in such a ill-affected state felt blood rush to his cheeks quickly, his right hand moving to lay against Mako's legs and then slowly moving to her waist. This is where Gamagoori's memory shorts out on him and his actions are alien to him. Mako could feel his hands start to roam and quickly intercepted them. She then noticed quickly that his eyes had taken on a semi-glassy appearance. She was unaware of his next move and only caught on to it as she was suddenly moving and falling. When she finally could track where she was, she realized that she probably wouldn't get out.

Gamagoori, in his fever-induced hysteria, had pulled Mako from her knelt place on his bed into his arms, pressed up against his sickly warm chest. Mako squirmed for a moment before Gamagoori's arms loosened enough for her to be comfortable within his grasp. Mako realized what was happening, and did not deny him of what he craved. She snuggled in to him, running a hand up his arm and to his neck, quickly getting comfortable within his arms. Although his breath was damp and the heat coming off his body wasn't a good sign, she had to admit being in his arms was incredibly soothing. A wall of hard corded muscle and protection wrapped around her, even when sick, was great.

"Please stay..." she heard him whisper. She moved her hand again to run along his bare chest. She looked up at his face, seeing him look at her with a heavy-lidded gaze. She poked at his nose.

"Okay. I'll stay"

A faint smile made its way along his lips. "Thank you"

Mako rested her head alongside his chest, sinking into the bed and taking in the peace she felt being in his arms. She ignored the sickly heat radiating off his skin, and the dampness of his breath as it fell across her neck. She focused instead on the soft beating of his heart in her ears and how it seemed to accelerate as she poked along the lines of his ribs.

"I'll stay until you don't need me" she murmured as she slipped into sleep soundless, the beating of their hearts guiding her through to her dreams.

When Gamagoori suddenly woke up, the fog in his head had cleared enough for him to think clearly like himself again, to evaluate the consequences of taking a day off for personal reasons. He immediately knew he would have school work to make up and crap to put off with when he confronted Lady Satsuki and the Elite Four about this incident. He could deal with the first, but the second will test his patience, especially with Jakuzure and Sanageyama who have badgered him before on the fact that his feelings for Mako had evolved to much more than originally meant. He started to move when he realized that he was not alone in his bed. His arms were wrapped around something warm and solid, obviously a body. He looked down and found his answer, and felt the blood rush quickly to his cheeks.

Mako lay curled up in his arms, peacefully sleeping away without a care. Her hands were balled into fists, laid against his pectorals. He could hear her faint breathing, and saw a smile form against her lips. Gamagoori had to admit he loved the way she slept so carefree; he

also hid back the notion that he was really enjoying the feel of her against him which slid into the back of his mind alongside his fever, so no negative reaction. His gaze shifted then to a carefully folded note on his nightstand, along with two bottles of what looked like prescription medicine. Carefully without waking Mako up, he reached for the note and pulled it open. He blinked rapidly to shake sudden fuzziness from his eyes and read the words printed upon the rich paper in his hands.

'Take one of each with water and soft foods. You better keep our daughter safe and happy or we're coming for you. Thank you, nonetheless, for making her happy and protecting her,

-Sukuyo and Barazo Mankanshoku'

'Her parents... how did they find out about this? About...' his thoughts stopped as he felt Mako shifted within his arms, and when he looked down at her, her eyes were staring up at him. They did not say anything to each other, and honestly Gamagoori was wondering if one's face could start to physically burn in flames from the amount of blushing he was doing. Mako's hand slid up from his chest to his forehead, the back of her cool hand soothing his fever-lit skin once more.

"Still hot... your fever hasn't broken yet" Mako sounded disappointed, obviously hoping that the fever capturing him had started to leave. "Hey, what's that?"

She gestured to the note and Gamagoori set it on her head. She grabbed it and read it quickly, her eyes then looking to the bottle of medicines.

"B-but I didn't get to go out and get those! How would mom and dad know?!"

Gamagoori's eyes sought out the camera he knew was wedged in the far right corner of his room, reserved for viewing for one person. He had a feeling he knew who had sent for medicine. He redirected

his gaze back to Mako and snatched the note from her hands, setting it back in its original place.

"Hey! Give it back!" Mako exclaimed, reaching for it but Gamagoori's arms wove around her again and pulled her back against him. She screeched jokingly as she settled into his arms.

"I said I would stay until you didn't need me..." Mako murmured, looking up at his face. Courtesy of his illness, he was drowsy and sleepy as hell and he had fallen asleep once more. His arms did not budge when she pushed against them softly. She cuddled close to him again, once more listening intently to the sound of his heart.

"So I'll stay until you send me away"

The Second Date

Mako sighed as she stared out her window, the wind whipping her hair back and forth around her. She really loved being in his car; no roof, all raw power and sound, and of course the driver was a double bonus. They had planned this for a day or so, working out details, date locations, timing, and of course getting the approval of Mako's parents and Lady Satsuki's stamp of approval (although Mako already knew that they had it). Gamagoori had knocked back his illness like a champ and finally he looked like himself again. Today, however, was not about their time fighting sickness but about their relationship. They were on a date, their second one. If all went well, they were going to spend the day in Osaka! Food, fun, maybe even boating! And she wouldn't have to pay a cent, well unless she wanted to because she had some spending money.

Today was going to be amazing! She couldn't wait to get there. They had even gone out to get new clothes, and of course Gamagoori paid for it all the gentlemen. She was wearing high-waisted tan shorts overtop black leggings, a comfortable white high-collar shirt with blue accents, a pair of brown boots and to accessorize she added a yellow headband-hair bow combo in her hair, just above her bangs. She has had to make sure her headband didn't blow off several times but now it seemed glued to her head. She adjusted it slightly to the left as the wind whipped her around again, keeping her eyes on the blurring surroundings.

They were on their way now to Osaka, driving down the long empty highway going at least seventy miles per hours. The pleasant weather coupled with comfortable temperatures and soothing wind put the in the perfect conditions for a date. From her spot in the passenger seat, she could see the Naniwa Sky Tower raise up through the skyline of trees and low city buildings before them.

"Come on, Gamagoori! We're almost there, pedal to the metal! Woohooo!" Mako hollered, standing up in her seat and gripping the

top of the windshield. She somehow slipped out of her seatbelt like a liquid, once more showing off his flexibility.

"Mankanshoku, sit back down! I don't want you to fall out! And put your seatbelt back on now!"

Mako sighed, leaning her head back as the wind slowed into a peaceful breeze. It felt amazing. It reminded her of the time she shot that machine gun during No-Late Day.

"This feels so good" she murmured, sighing in relief. The car rocked softly as she closed her eyes, the wind stopping. Mako then realized that Gamagoori had stopped the car and pulled over, giving her a dangerous look. She locked eyes with him, challenging him to try anything. She saw the anger disappear in his eyes, her determination getting to him again.

"Sit down Mankanshoku" Gamagoori asked with a sigh. Mako pouted but complied with Gamagoori's wishes, pulling her seatbelt back on. She settled into her seat again as Gamagoori got the car rolling, building up his speed back to seventy. Mako started to hum as they kept going on in relaxing silence.

"On a drive, on a drive! On a drive to Hell! Goin' totally upside-down to the bottom of the pit. Hey!" Mako sang softly, rocking her head side to side with her tune. She could see Gamagoori smile from the corner of her eye. As she started to gain a breath to sing the next line, Gamagoori quickly joined in, taking the line before she could.

"We've left the track and are going to crash. Hit someone from behind and you get a pileup!" As he paused the song purposely, he gave a knowing glance at Mako. She grinned wide as she inhaled audibly, and joined Gamagoori in sing-screaming the last line to the silent world around them.

"We'll all go to Hell together!"

As they let the song settle, the giggles began, first from Mako and they slowly built up in her before Gamagoori caught the laughing bug and they were laughing in unison over the absurdity of the song and the hilarity of singing it together. Their laughing continued on, both strongly and weakly under their breaths all the way to the entrance of Osaka and only then did it die away into silence.

"Osakaaaaaaa!" Mako cried, fist held in the air, "We made it! Woohoo! I can smell the food from here!"

Gamagoori had to crack a smile; he hadn't even started his plans and he was getting this date right. "Alright, relax Mankanshoku-"

"Mako. Just... call me Mako. You've called me by my real name several times already"

"I have not!" Gamagoori argued, fighting back a blush, "I would not dare cross such boundaries!"

"You have! I didn't realize it until I played through my memory! You slipped up several times, and honestly it doesn't bother me at all" Mako admitted with a touch of embarrassment. She looked out her side window once more, building slipping by them. Gamagoori didn't respond, simply stewing in his embarrassment knowing that he had slipped up.

"I wouldn't mind it if you continued to call me by my first name" Mako silently added.

Gamagoori stayed silent, letting the conversation drop into the void as they continued to drive in silence, the sounds and bustle of the city taking to their ears. After a solid minute of complete silence, Gamagoori sighed and gave in.

"If you wish it, then I shall try to my best ability... Mako"

Mako's smile immediately returned full-time. "Yahoo! Alright, so where are we going? Victory Road food tour? Climbing the tower?"

Messing with the Takarada Conglomerate like Satsuki recommended?"

Mako looked suddenly to her right as a huge lit up neon sign flash the Takarada name along with its current head, Kaneo Takarada, surrounded by varying designs of money and currency with the words 'The Dosh King' lit up in capital letters beneath and above him.

"Maybe mess with the Takarada Conglomerate, the Dosh King sounds scary" Mako murmured as they rode down the highway and finally hitting some traffic, forced to see the Dosh King signs three more times before pulling off the highway along with other dilapidated cars and scooters.

"Don not let Takarada intimidate you Mako. He could never stand par with Satsuki. I've seen stronger eyebrows that could use money better"

"You mean Lady Satsuki's eyebrows right? They're big and majestic!"

"... alright, let's get off the subject of Lady Satsuki. Today is about us, about you. And we're about there now"

Mako gasped when she realized where they were going. "No way! You mean- NO WAY! You couldn't have! Gamagoori, are we really?!"

Gamagoori smirked as they pulled in to the parking lot, not saying a word. He let Mako squirm in anticipation of what was to come. He parked in the closest spot and quickly got out to open Mako's door. He offered a hand to help her out.

"Come on then. We don't want to squander today now do we?"

All seemed fine, all was actually rather amusing. They seemed to be enjoying themselves, but what did he know? He was watching from

the cameras trained on them and now they had to find them again because they temporarily disappeared out of view, last seen heading down an unnamed alley out of the sight of the public.

"Targets confirmed, Lord Takarada" one of his spotters alerted him, opening up the camera of the duo strolling down an open alley toward the main road toward the one place he had hoped they would go.

"Good! Now how does everything seem so far?"

"Their date seems to be going perfect from the way Mankanshoku is smiling and jumping. They're heading for the bathhouse as we speak"

"Good, good! Make sure my 'invitation' is sent and get me in contact with the Kiryūin conglomerate girly, Satsuki. She probably would want an update right about now"

A series of beeps echoed in their hiding spot within the tower hideout. "Connecting you now to Lady Satsuki Kiryūin" his orderly informed him, returning then to her duties of recording the data and filing the appropriate paperwork for the job.

Takarada tapped against his chair in neutral patience as the call rang, awaiting the other end's pick up. The sound of a click came a few heartbeats later.

"Satsuki here"

"Ahh, Satsuki! It's Takarada. Your plan so far for the lovebirds is working on schedule. I correctly assumed you wanted an update?"

"How close are they to the bathhouse?" She asked, a smile obvious in her voice. Takarada laughed loudly, poking at a button on his chair and pulled up his live feed of Gamagoori and Mako walking toward the Takarada Natural Spring Bathhouse and Hotel. He had to chuckle at the amount of blushing those two dorks were doing, and

all they had done was shop around, enjoy lunch, and go through the food alleys rather gleefully.

"They're on route as we speak. They should be sitting in towels anytime now. My invitation for VIP inside pools and private rooms for the connecting hotel has been sent and seen, so you should have your footage soon"

A chuckle came through the call. "I never thought I would ever thank you for your help, Takarada"

"Just don't for now missy, you'll be doing that later I'm so sure. Now! How many angles do you want for this party? 180, 360, all eyes?"

"All eyes, with concentration on the audio" Satsuki requested.

Takarada gave the order. "So one camera for every angle and audio capturing capability. Good! I'll send you the live feed connection when they get in"

The call disconnected from Satsuki's side and Takarada let a sigh out, sinking into the chair and absently pulled out a pile of his money, flicking his finger over the crisp bills. The pay and benefits of this job were getting good, plus he had to give it to the girl; she had good plans involving these two. He didn't mind eavesdropping on these two at all; it was admitted a good thing to use money on.

"Now let's get this started, you two idiots. Your queen and high parliament want to see how your date goes..."

"Ooooooh! Bathhouse! I was right, we were heading for this glorious place of relaxation and rejuvenation!"

Today had been perfect, Mako had already decided even before they got here. Their date was just... perfection. The chivalry and courteousness he put forth for her was captivating enough from the start, but what he proceeded to do made the day ever more

enjoyable. Trip to shop within Osaka's hidden gem stores, picking up things she never dreamed of owning like jewelry and she even was able to pick things up for her family, at Gamagoori's recommendation! Then they stopped for lunch at a delicious place that served Yoshoku dishes from all over Japan, and they helped themselves to generous amounts of Omuraisu and Tempura shrimp. After relaxing after their meal, which meant they just wandered through Osaka talking and being cute together resulting in a moment where she peeled away a layer of Gamagoori's tough outer shell, Gamagoori eventually caved and they went to a alleyway Mako graciously dubbed as the 'Victory Road of Kanto food'.

This date had gone better then Mako could ever imagine, and it wasn't even done yet! The sun had barely begun to set and they still had one more destination.

Takarada Natural Spring Bathhouse.

"I've never been to one before but I've heard they're great places for relaxing out the worries in you!" Mako exclaimed, "Have you been in one Gamagoori?"

He shook his head. "Not that I remember, no"

Mako jumped up next to him and grabbed his hand, dragging him a bit to get him to go faster. He squeezed her hand and tried to keep up while making a point by letting her know he would not sprint to the front doors. Mako whined about his speed not being fast enough but agreed to slow it down, glad to walk by his side hand in hand like the couple they were. It amused Mako still that every time she looked up at him he was blushing like crazy. She couldn't escape blushing either because she was amazed by his willingness to hold hands like this. As they neared the Bathhouse's main entrance, Gamagoori cracked a smile.

"This really has been enjoyable, Mankanshoku"

Mako stopped their walk and turned to him, smiling from ear to ear. "I did too! Perfect second date! Thank you for taking me to Osaka"

Gamagoori's smile grew even bigger, his hand seeking to cup the left side of her face. Mako leaned into the warm palm of her boyfriend, never moving her eyes from the blush returning softly to his cheeks. Neither realized that they had moved closer until they felt the comforting pressure of each other's lips. They knew, but let it continue without a worry, Mako's arms weaving themselves around his neck, his lips moving in unison with his lips. Mako stepped slowly out of it, gingerly cupping the hand still on her cheek.

"We should get inside before we lose our chance to get in" Mako softly said, a blush rising back to her cheeks. Gamagoori cleared his throat and took back his hand.

"You're right, we should"

They proceeded to enter the lobby of the Bathhouse, surprised to see the absence, or lack thereof, of the face of the Takarada Conglomerate everywhere. It was a modest little with spotless traditional Japanese decoration and polished wood counters. The clerk within the room looked up from her book and quickly set it down.

"Hello! You couldn't be Mankanshoku and Gamagoori, could you?" she asked, brushing her hair back into a quick bun behind her head, obviously rushing to keep her air of professionalism. The couple exchanged surprised looks.

"We are" Gamagoori curtly replied, "What of it?"

The clerk gave a nervous smile, fishing out a clipboard. "You've been sent a private invitation, more a formal regal invitation, for the bathhouse's more specialty pools and even a room in our adjoined hotel for the night. If you'll follow me, I can escort you to your private bath"

They silently followed the young girl, trying to fix the puzzle they were presented. Private rooms, private bath, regal invitation? They didn't have a clue on who would set it up but they went along with it anyway. Their escort stopped at the entrance of the separate bathroom into the bath house of Private Suite number one.

"Here we are. You can undress in the bathrooms here and acquire towels as well. The door into the bathhouse itself is at the end of the rooms for easy entrance and exit. Your room is marked by a metal slide door near your view of the bay of Osaka on the far wall. I hope you enjoy your stay here! Call if you have any questions or if something is not to your liking"

They parted to let the girl get back to her station and stared at the doors ahead of them. Mako audibly swallowed the lump forming in her throat and simply walked into her room, stripping as the door closed with a soft slam behind her. She walked across the tiled floor, tossing her clothes into a semi-neat pile until she was left in her undergarments. She stared into the mirror to her left and poked at her shoulders. She could do this, she cheered herself on, you are Mako Mankanshoku and you are going to show your body to the person you love the most! If not then she could stay within her towel. Nonetheless she would have to shed away her panties and bra to step out into the warm muggy air of the bathhouse. She slowly slipped the straps of her bra off and unclipped it, letting it fall to the ground. She wrapped her arms around her, lifting up her breasts. She could do this! She was not shy about her body, and she knew that she could trust Gamagoori with her body. She was just uncertain of his reaction, what he would do when he saw her in all her glory. No! No, he would probably try to keep his eyes off her like the respectable person he is! He wouldn't dare let his eyes, or anything really, roam over her while she was nude!

She stepped out of her panties and set both her undergarments into the pile she made and moved it into the chute that would carry them into their room. She paced for a moment, hyping herself up with an

internal rant, getting herself ready. She had control! She could do this!

She grabbed a towel from its folded spot and wrapped it around her, tucking it in for it to stay closed below her collar bone. The towel went down just at about mid-calf, above her knees. She shifted around it with a goofy smile. She could do this. She walked toward the door out and pushed it open, hit by the wave of scented water and muggy steam.

The bath was larger than she expected it stretching out possibly thirty feet in a series of wavy like shapes, giving the bath an interesting shape. The scent in the air was soft and pleasant, and all Mako wanted to do was relax into the perfume of the air. She made her way to the edge of the water, stepping into it without a pause. The water was warmer then she thought at first, stinging her ankles enough for her to yelp a bit, but it was easy to acclimate with it and farther she went in. When the water had hit her knees, she knew she wouldn't be able to stay in the towel much longer. She looked over her shoulder, hoping to see Gamagoori but found the room empty and silent besides the fountain's constant sound of streaming water from the middle of the pool. Maybe he was having the same issue she had before coming out? She could only get on that. She unwrapped the towel from around her body and threw it on to the dry side and sank slowly into the water.

Mako sighed in relief as her body slid through the warm waters, her muscles loosening up and relaxing, her body grateful for the healing caress of the bath. She dipped her chin down into the water, letting it cover her mouth for a moment until she sat up and leaned against the steps to lounge out. She ran her hands over her body until they returned to her naval and let them rest there. Her breasts poked out of the water as well as her knees, and as a cold winds swept over them she lowered them back in the water.

"Mhhhh, warm..." Mako murmured, letting the sound of the fountains lull her into a peaceful state. The decision to go here was a great idea, Mako decided, letting her eyes close. She heard a door open

and close, but she knew it was Gamagoori so she stayed relaxed. Her body rose up from the water again and she let it stay there. She wasn't ashamed of showing her body to people she loved.

"M-Mankanshoku!?"

Mako flipped over on to her stomach, looking up at the towel-clad Gamagoori from the pool. His face had gone bright red, his hand firmly holding his towel together. Mako gave him a once-over look, admiring the marvel that stood before her. Sculpted, rippling muscles everywhere she looked, no matter where she did look. Chiseled stomach, chiseled everything; every inch of him looked like it was made of marble! She wanted to touch it. She sighed and rested her head on her folded arms, her breasts squishing down underneath her.

"Hi Gamagoori..." Mako greeted. Gamagoori's eyes went for her eyes the moment she spoke, instantly seeing the difference in her gaze. She let her eyes wander down at his chest, and Gamagoori matched her gaze by following it, realizing what she was doing; ogling him. He cleared his throat and snapped Mako out of his daze.

"Huh? Oh... hehe sorry Gamagoori for staring it's just that your body... looks really good and..."

Gamagoori's lips formed a smile. "It's alright. Thank you for the compliment"

Mako's smile returned and she tilted her head to the side. "It really is! It looks like sculpted marble, there's so many muscles on your body!"

Gamagoori's blush returned but it was out of embarrassment of being marveled by Mako. Her smile told her she was being honest and genuine in her admiration. He also noticed that she put effort into covering her breasts up, her arms being the barrier between his eyes and the bare skin she flaunted. He stepped into the waters, letting the warmth of the pool send shiver through his legs.

"Come on in, come on in!" Mako cheered, slapping her hands against the water. She moved a bit backward so he could get a spot to sit in the bath beside her. He gave a lopsided smile before removing his towel and sinking with haste into the water beside Mako, the water rising up to her abdomen. Mako kept a blush on her face from the quickest shot of his lower half she got and scooted an inch away from him. She knew she really shouldn't be embarrassed but she couldn't help herself. Gamagoori sighed as the water's temperature rose around them, the steam coming off the top signalling the change. Mako felt it as well and gave a groan of relief as she flipped over back on her back and let herself sink in to the water. Gamagoori's face, although already red courtesy of the water, grew to a new hue as he saw the briefest shadow of her breasts once more.

"This was the greatest idea you've had since asking me out Ira" Mako murmured, looking up at him, "I'm happy"

Gamagoori had to smile, his inner self celebrating. "Then I'm happy Mako"

He leaned down to take Mako's chin in his hand. She looked up at him with large pensive eyes, and slowly rose up out of the water. She let a soft sigh leave her lips as she felt the comforting pressure of Gamagoori's lips kissing her. She kissed him back with equal vigor, making sure each inch of his lips was mapped in her attempt. As their lips collided, Mako's hand wandered up Gamagoori's planted arm beside her and rested it on his shoulder, while Gamagoori's free arm moved to rest on Mako's submerged legs. As Gamagoori tilted his head, allowing him to closely access to Mako's mouth, he experimentally let his tongue move, brushing it against Mako's lower lip. Mako gasped and broke their kiss, her hand covering her mouth. Gamagoori's face went red again and Mako looked away from him coyly, her face about as red as hers. He hastily moved his hands from her legs.

He also slid about five feet from her in fear that he got aroused.

A smile cracked through Mako's shielded mouth and she giggled. "You caught me by surprise Ira, it's okay, come back! I'm sorry"

"No! No, no it's my fault I went too far too fast" Gamagoori apologized, returning to Mako's side, albeit reluctantly because he felt guilt weighing down on him. Mako saw the slack in his face and wrapped her arms around his neck, bring them closer.

"It's all good, Ira. Don't feel guilty for trying something like that" Mako told him with a peck on his lips, "Maybe we could try it later, 'kay?"

Gamagoori caved in once more, his smile returning. He agreed to the terms of their later attempt and their decision to get out of the bath before the pruned up to no end. They discovered fluffy white robes awaiting them next to their hotel room door and they took turns putting them on to limit showing off their bare bodies to each other again (to Gamagoori's request because he felt uncomfortable seeing Mako completely in the nude). The metal door opened for them with a soft hissing sound and Mako was flopping on the bed quicker than Gamagoori could call her name to be careful. The Western-style bed was large enough to definitely hold them both, and Mako spread out on the bed, her robe almost opening fully as she stretched until Gamagoori tossed Mako a nightgown with her name taped to it from the small closet in the room. Mako lifted up the soft blue nightgown, finding it's pattern had small little rabbits on it, and hugged it to her body, finding it smooth as silk.

"I wonder who stocked this room! It's like they really did know us" Mako commented, looking around the spacious room. Her eyes caught on their large window, which revealed the busy, lit-up downtown Osaka and its bay. Mako gravitated to it and placed her hands on the glass, peering out at the scenery. The sun was almost completely down, bathing the Kanto city in darkness enough to make the city's busy light illuminate even brighter. She could see every car running through the streets and see boats and party boats filter in and out of the bay.

"You have to see this Gamagoori! Look at the view, it's so pretty!" Mako cheered. She slipped into her nightgown as Gamagoori emerged from the bathroom with black pajama bottoms on. Mako wiped the suddenly falling drool from the corner of her mouth and pointed out to the city.

Gamagoori came up beside her, looking down at the city before them. He had to admit it was a rather spectacular sight to see a town be this busy and functional, and he had to give credit to the Takarada Conglomerate for keeping it this way.

Mako yawned loudly, "It's pretty isn't it?"

Gamagoori pressed a kiss softly to the side of Mako's head. "Indeed. We should get some sleep so we're awake when I drive you home"

Mako nodded as she yawned again, drowsily wandering into the bed and curling within the blankets. She opened an eye and patted the pillow beside her head to get Gamagoori to join her. She could see he was getting tired too, and he did say 'we'. He got into the bed with her after a minute, throwing the covers over them both and snuggling into his side to face her. Mako, before she fell into the pulling arms of sleep, cuddling up into Gamagoori's embrace.

"Good night Ira. Thank you for the date"

As Mako closed her eyes and fell asleep, Gamagoori softly rubbed a spot on her back, contemplating something for a moment. He rested his chin on her head and gave it a quick decision, seeing as though he was laying in bed with her and he felt nothing less than pure joy and feelings. HE closed his eyes with a smile before responding to her.

"Thank you for liking me, Mako"

He didn't need a response. He had his own. Official girlfriend status?

Check. He wandered into sleep with a huge grin on his face and the hope that Mako felt the same as him right now.

The Second Response and Third Date

Gamagoori looked over at his still-sleeping girlfriend curled up in his passenger seat, sleeping away their drive home as he predicted. She was reluctant to get up in the morning, groggily going through the motions of getting dressed and greeting him and he had to admit lazy, sleepy kisses with Mako was a great experience. It wasn't a rushed experience, neither was it a hot and heavy makeout session which he also had to admit was really good. The morning sleepy kisses were sweet and soft and hypnotized Gamagoori into wanting to sleep once again.

He found himself smiling and blushing as he ventured back into the present, and he really did not mind. The only person to see it was Mako and he seemed not to mind that she saw it anyway.

He focused on the drive ahead of him and pulled onto the highway back home, leaving Osaka and its Takarada rule behind them. He pulled into the fast lane and set his speed at the comfortable seventy miles per hour and cruised down the road with no real care besides getting Mako home safe. He looked over again at Mako and noticed she had moved so she was curled up on her side facing him, mumbling in her sleep with a goofy grin on her face. He felt his heart melt a bit from the cuteness of it. It seemed impossible for her not to be cute.

He returned his eyes to the road and sped along the road, nonchalantly passing the very few cars heading the same way. There wasn't much to do besides think with Mako resting beside him, that and driving. He couldn't stop thinking, however, about the incident during their date in the bathhouse. He had survived the initial shock of seeing Mako completely naked, which still stirred something he couldn't identify inside him. He had to admit she had an admirable body, one he could guess some students were jealous of due to the size of her breasts. He survived and passed his embarrassment thanks to Mako, who seemed just as bent on

admiring his body as he did for her body. He also pondered something. Seeing that Mako had once said that a person should only ever show themselves in their full glory to the one they loved the most (he had found her shouting it to a student she caught doing something disgusting in one of the bathrooms she had to clean as punishment).

Did that mean that she felt he was the one?

He shook his head of the cobwebs, focusing on his driving. He could think about it later. He could probably ask her about it when the time was right. For now, they could bathe in the twilight of their relationship until dawn finally breaks. He smiled once more and turned his car on to the off-ramp, the towering Honnō City and Honnōji Academy rising high and mighty before them. Mako grumbled in her sleep, her smile widening before she flipped to her other side. Gamagoori looked down at his dashboard, seeing that he was almost out of gas. He would have to take a pit stop or he wouldn't be able to get home. He spotted a small gas stop along the side of the road across the ridge over the bay, and merged into the far right lane to prepare to pull off.

A pit stop was needed anyway. Mako had to wake up sooner or later. He pulled up to one of the empty pumps and was fast to work on getting his car filled up, primarily because being spotted in the dingy broke-down pump station could have serious consequences. As the pump filled the tank, Gamagoori leaned in to the passenger side of his car, brushing Mako's hair away from her eyes. Her hair was thrown around by the wind and hung in varying directions, giving Mako one of the cutest disheveled looks Gamagoori had seen. He continued his mindless hair moving, more admittedly petting, until he saw Mako's brown eyes flutter open, a soft smile tugging at the edge of her lips.

"Good morning, sleepy" Gamagoori greeted her, moving another wisp of her hair out of her face. She smiled widely at him and yawned, stretching out his arms.

"Where are we? Are we home?" she asked, sitting up and looking around.

Gamagoori shook his head. "Almost. We're just stopping here for a moment to fuel up the car"

Mako nodded and relaxed into her seat, stretching out her back.
"Kay!"

"Don't fall asleep again" Gamagoori asked. Mako gave a confirming nod that she heard him and reached up to give him a chaste kiss before he had to deal with the pump, which dinged that his tank was full. He replaced the nozzle back on the pump, closed his tank, and returned to the driver side of his car where he proceeded to start his car up and turn on the AC. The weather was already pleasant and getting hotter, Mako noticed. She rubbed her eyes to kick away the last of her remaining drowsiness. She stuck her face near the air vents and sighed as the cold air swept through her hair and over her face. She sat back with a call of 'Let's Go!', and relaxed into the cool air of the car as Gamagoori pulled out of the gas station and back on to the slum roads, dodging the trash-covered corners and complaining about the quality of them.

"When did it get so hot?" Mako moaned, throwing her arms up over her head.

It really had suddenly gotten warmer as the sun rose up into the sky above them, heat battering down on them. They had taken a second stop to strip themselves of unneeded layers of clothes and to buy supplies such as water. Mako had on now her tan shorts and a spare blue tank top, her bow now keeping her hair up in a very small ponytail. Her bangs slapped against her forehead and the side of her face and Mako swatted them back.

"Are you sure you want to return to your home Mankanshoku?" Gamagoori asked once more. Mako actually took the time to contemplate the idea.

"I can't leave my family to sweat to death in this heat though! We don't get cool air down here in the slums and we always deal through a heat wave together. I can't abandon my family!"

Gamagoori respected her decision and continued to drive through the slums toward her home and her family. Mako went on to talk about what her family had done once during a heat wave so horrid that they were forced to fight for shady spots with other families who were desperate for a break from the sun, explaining in detail the efforts of the fight and how she had gotten her family a room in a hidden hotel within the slums which had air conditioning. Mako had called upon her spot in the Cheer Squad and they got in and enjoyed the cool air until the Cheer Squad came and kicked them out because Mako had forgotten to go to school and go to practice.

"If you count the Tennis Club, I've been kicked out of every club I joined besides Fight Club" Mako exclaimed. "Besides, the clubs always bullied me so I'm glad I got kicked out of them"

"If they start targeting you again, Mako, alert me. I'll make sure that you stay safe"

Mako smiled. "Ryuuko has that covered though! Maybe you could beat the crud out of them! It's like you're my-"

Gamagoori looked to his left as he spoke. "Shield..."

Mako let it settle into her skin. Ira Gamagoori, the impenetrable shield of Lady Satsuki, was giving his service of shield to her. He was now the impenetrable shield of Lady Satsuki and Mako Mankanshoku. She giggled into her hands and wormed around in her seat in happiness. Gamagoori blushed softly as he realized that she was happy for that fact and pushed the car to go faster. The banter between each other continued comfortably, Mako weeding out Gamagoori's nervousness for being her shield and pushing it away. He loosened up and started talking about a time in his youth where he protected a female student who had fallen under the thumb of a conglomerate who had falsely accused her family of crimes.

Mako listened to his heroic and chivalrous story with wide eyes, absorbing every single word for later story telling to her family. They passed stories back and forth until they pulled up to the alley opening leading to Mako's home.

They found her home completely empty and deserted. No bright neon sign, no familiar dilapidated car, not even the deep fryer in their small kitchen. It was all gone. Every scrap of evidence that anyone lived there was missing.

"Where's my mom? My dad, Guts?! WHERE DID IT ALL GO?" Mako was hysterical. She searched through her house several times before breaking down on the roof, sobbing into her hands, fearing the worst for her family and Ryuuko. Gamagoori was just utterly confused. Mako was under the protection of an Elite Four, there was no way that her family had been kicked out. He sat down next to her and comforted her, telling her that this must be something else going on besides kidnapping or banishment. Just when Mako was dissolving into inconsolable sorrow, Gamagoori's phone buzzed in his back pocket, and he picked it up.

"Gamagoori, Mako, are you there?"

Lady Satsuki had called them, jumping into their lives perfectly timed.

"Y-yeah" Mako answered, wiping her tears quickly.

"I had Inumuta track your location. Relax Mako, it's all right. Your family isn't missing. I did a kind gesture and had them relocated into the One-Star condos"

"What?!"

"Lady Satsuki?!"

They could hear her chuckle from the call. "You are dating one of my Elite and I see it fit that your family earns benefits from such. I can fill

you in on the other details when you get back to the Academy. Gamagoori, you know where to go with the weather like this. We'll be waiting for you two, but take your time. I realize I have scared you Mako. Collect yourself and come when you can"

Satsuki disconnected and left the couple in silence. Mako was in tears again, her hands folded in front of her face. Satsuki had relocated her family into better living situations? She closed her eyes and let the tears fall, grateful for Lady Satsuki's kindness. She felt Gamagoori's arms wrap around her waist and she leaned into his sturdy form. He soothingly rubbed his hand up and down her side, calming her down from the high of fearing for her family.

"Lady Satsuki really must like us together for doing these things for me" Mako murmured, looking up at Gamagoori once she calmed and collected herself. Gamagoori smiled and kissed her forehead.

"She must. We should be getting to the Academy" Mako nodded in agreement, kissing him quickly before jumping off the roof of the old tin-covered house and jumping into her designated spot in the passenger's seat. Gamagoori was quick to follow and revved the car up quickly and was off down the streets as fast as he could pull off in the tight-cornered, trash-littered streets. The heat around them grew heavy, and Mako was slowly melting and sweating away. The humidity did not help the heat at all, getting Gamagoori soaked in sweat as well as he pulled on to the main road up to the Academy, pulling into eighty easy and racing up the ramp-like road. As they neared the end of the road, Gamagoori pulled off onto a hidden road that put him on track to the underground garage for the Elite Four. He parked quickly and he and Mako raced inside the building and gladly stepped into the cool, air conditioned building.

"Cool air" Mako yelled as she slumped against the glass of the elevator as it took them to their destination. "Air conditioning! It feels like heaven"

Gamagoori slid down beside her, panting as he tried to cool down. "Agreed. It's like hell out there"

Mako looked over at him with a wide smile. "Thank goodness then that we made it inside! Now what would really top it off if there was a pool here"

As the elevator opened for them on their predestined floor, Mako knew her wish was granted when she smelled chlorine and lotion. The light from inside the room dimmed and revealed the huge pool situated in the middle of a room filled with filtered light from outside, a balmy, comfortable temperature and the greatest collection of cool-down equipment she could ever imagine. The smell of chlorine started to draw her out, and she couldn't believe the fact that the Academy had an indoor pool this clear and private that she could now access without being hit. Beach chairs and deckchairs framed the other side of the pool as well as palm trees and background beach noises, adding to the cacophony of smells and sounds.

Let's not forget to mention that Satsuki, Nonon, Inumuta, and Sanageyama were waiting for them inside as well. As Mako wandered out with her mouth gaping open at the room, the Elite swarmed Gamagoori before he could catch Mako and dragged him off, capturing him in their net of questions, snark, and obvious devious smirks. Satsuki and Mako were left in the cool of the pool room, and Mako was just about ready to jump into the coldness of the pool in her underwear before Satsuki intercepted her mid-strip, her shirt halfway off and stuck around her head. Mako struggled to get her shirt either off or on and Satsuki simply helped her by pulling it the rest of the way over her head. She folded the tank over her arm, and smiled warmly as Mako stood silently in her bra.

"Bathing suit?" Satsuki prompted. Mako turned to her and wilted.

"None" Mako moaned sadly, and then looked up at Satsuki with a hopeful sparkle. "Can I borrow one by any chance Lady Satsuki?"

Satsuki led the way with eager Mako in tow. She quickly instructed Soroi to have a few laid out for them to choose and stepped inside as she let Soroi complete his work. A towel was handed to Mako upon her entrance into Satsuki's private suit on this floor from Soroi.

"For drying off later, Lady Mako" Soroi explained, returning to pulling out swimsuits from Satsuki's large walk-in closet. Mako sat down on the bed, touching the silky sheets with admiration. Satsuki watched Mako slowly but surely spread out on the bed and rubbed her cheeks into the fluffiness of her pillows, the cold silk of her blankets, and the softness of her hanging drapes over her bed.

"Enjoying yourself?" Satsuki asked softly, sitting down beside her on the bed as she quickly sat up and undid her bow tie and let her hair fall back into its original style. She ran her hands through her hair to clam her throbbing head.

"Your bed's really soft! I would kill for a bed this soft and nice, well maybe not kill" Mako exclaimed, throwing her hair up in her version of a hairflip and let it settle a little tussled, "So you relocated my family, right?"

Satsuki nodded in confirmation. "Yes. I felt I was doing your family wrong by keeping them in the slums while you were enjoying Three-Star accommodation with Gamagoori, so I moved them up into one of the better One-Star condos. Unless something happens between you two, they will stay there and enjoy One-Star accommodations once again, including Ryuuko. They won't be targeted, they won't pay immediate fees or taxes. They are under the protection of The Elite Four and myself. Ryuuko is obviously excluded but she can defend herself from the club presidents, she's proven herself."

Mako didn't exactly agree with keeping Ryuuko excluded but at least her family was safe from harm. "But what if Ryuuko stays with us at home? Is she protected then off of school grounds?"

"Of course. She's with your family and the protection will extend to her when she is with them. Do not worry Mako Mankanshoku. You have good company here"

Mako smiled and flopped back on to the bed. "I never thought you were so nice Lady Satsuki! It's a good different side of you from your cold queenly stature!"

Satsuki stood up with a smirk as Soroi returned with a selection of swimsuits to choose from. "Who said a queen could not show compassion to her subjects from time to time? Thank you Soroi"

Soroi promptly left the girls alone after handing Satsuki the suits he had retrieved. Mako immediately dived for the only one piece suit. Plain blue with an open back and a modest neck line, Satsuki had to appreciate Mako's cling to it; it was one of her older ones but she loved its plain appeal. As she started to strip out of her bra, she realized she wasn't alone and immediately threw on her bra again before she flashed Satsuki.

"Sorry Lady Satsuki! I'll go into the bathroom to change"

Satsuki stopped her before she jumped off the bed, holding a bathing suit of her own in her arms. "You don't need to. Just turn around and change quickly"

Mako quickly turned around as Satsuki ordered and faced the other wall, jumping back to the floor and stripping quickly, throwing her clothes into a pile near her feet. She dared not peek toward Satsuki in the slightest, though she could see the softest of light coming from behind her. She shimmied into the suit with some difficulty, adjusting her breasts to fit into the cups of the top correctly. Even with the best of her adjustments, her breasts were pushed up and looked larger than usual. She was dressed in it anyway and asked if she could turn around. Satsuki told her she could and she gladly did, quickly complimenting Satsuki's two piece black and blue bikini, admiring that it seemed to shine with her personal light when she looked at it at the right angle.

The duo gathered up their towels and finally walked out and admired the scene they walked in to.

Nonon was pushing an oblivious Inumuta into the pool, who was face deep in his phone and rapidly swiping his fingers around screen. As Nonon pushed him and he grew closer to the water, Inumuta immediately chucked his phone, which he was using to

probably catalog collected data, to Sanageyama who was laughing already at the scene from the sidelines with Gamagoori, who was hiding a chuckle and smile behind a well-placed hand. Inumuta hit the water with a hard slap, face first and everyone groaned at his bellyflop flailing fail. Nonon was snickering behind her hands as Inumuta shot out of the water, gasping for breath. His dark glare hit Nonon without a moment's hesitation, and everyone lost it in varying degrees. Nonon was out loud cackling, while Sanageyama was hollering at his stupidity. Mako was losing her battle not to laugh, going from hidden laughing into aloud chuckling, and Gamagoori and Satsuki somehow held back laughter behind their hands.

Their laughter softened and finally ceased as the Elite noticed that Satsuki and Mako were finally back out in the room. Gamagoori audibly swallowed and Sanageyama pushed him to move to Mako, who was already ogling him with great interest. Clad in grey board shorts, everything above the waist and below his mid-calf was open for viewing, and Mako was really grateful of his swimming shorts. ' *He still looks like a god,*' Mako thought, ' *and he's mine!*'

"Nice choice Mankanshoku!" Sanageyama shouted, surpassing Gamagoori who had frozen and stood admiring Mako on purpose. "The blue looks great on you"

"Thank you Sanageyama!" Mako replied, doing a 360 to show off the full suit, "Lady Satsuki was nice enough let me borrow it!"

Sanageyama risked looking over at Gamagoori, giving the biggest shit-eating smirk he could. Gamagoori was still rooted in his place, but his face had become shadowed, a dark, enraged look hidden. Nonon and Inumuta were watching Satsuki and Gamagoori respectively, relaying any changes in the other's target. Nonon quickly noted that Satsuki was looking at Sanageyama like he was an idiot for trying to tip Gamagoori off his ledge. Sanageyama stepped closer to Mako after returning his attention to her, placing a hand on her shoulder and prepping for another purposeful flirt attempt. With that last mistake, Gamagoori tipped off the iceberg he stood on and snapped. He gave a loud, guttural, predatory growl and

stepped closer to him, his teeth nearly bared in anger. The entire room stilled to a stop as everyone's expression, including Soroi who just walked in with drinks for everyone, warped into ones of bewilderment and complete disbelief.

"Gamagoori... did you just *growl* at Sanageyama?" Satsuki asked in disbelief, "And are you baring your teeth as well?"

Mako immediately went from bewilderment to embarrassment when she finally figured out why he had done it. It was because of Sanageyama flirting with her. ' *He was defending me,*' Mako thought with in internal gasp, ' *He grew immediately defensive of me!*'. Mako couldn't hide the blush rising to her cheeks, scooting closer to Satsuki. Sanageyama immediately moved away from Mako and actually jumped into the pool to avoid being attacked and swam as far away as possible, making sure his eyes and nose were above the water. Gamagoori snapped out of his defensive behavior and completely fell into a flustered panic, trying to explain his actions only to stutter out incomprehensible nonsense and start up another laughing fit from the others. Nonon and Inumuta couldn't hold it together and succumbed to their laughter, their heads falling to the concrete rim around the pool.

Sanageyama loosened up and stepped out of the pool, brushing his wet hair back from his face. "Never knew you'd be so defensive huh, Gamagoori?"

Inumuta's face suddenly fell in horror, his laughter dying. "Sanageyama, is my phone still in your pocket?"

Sanageyama dug into his pockets and pulled out one sopping wet phone. He chuckled weakly and held it up for Inumuta to see and immediately starting running as he was chased out of the pool area by a severely enraged, red-in-the-face tech who was about to kick his ass by the name of Houka Inumuta. The mood lightened as everyone watched the Dog and the Monkey chase each other around the room, Inumuta getting hits on Sanageyama even as they fought up the stairs and into the next floor. They continued to watch

until their fight disappeared into the farther inside areas of the Academy.

Gamagoori calmed down after that embarrassment of being that defensive and joined everyone in the pool, surprising Mako who was floating on top of the surface, nearly giving her a heart attack but making up for it by playing around underwater with her. Mako was a quick, nimble swimmer and was swimming circles around him before coming up for air quickly, diving back down, and kissing him briefly before swimming quickly out of his reach. As she returned to the surface she fought against his arms as they caught her, squealing as he brought her back against him, the duo oblivious to the others watching their displays of affection.

"I never thought I would see him this... loose and calm before. It's like Mako's the light switch to his softer side" Nonon commented as she watched them with her chin in her hands, feet kicking behind her as she lounged out on a deckchair. They had been watching for a while and were enjoying the show honestly. Inumuta and Sanageyama had returned, with the monkey sporting several bruises down his chest, on his neck and a big black eye. He was holding an ice pack to his black eye right now, sitting up and keeping from moving anything that was bruised. Inumuta was recording it all while trying to back up all the files he had gotten from the dead phone he got back after beating up Sanageyama.

"Or maybe it's the fact that she a strong character with bonus cute factors" Sanageyama offered, "She's just the cute, semi-airhead, smaller version of him. Call it fate that they fell for each other"

"It's obviously a personality attraction," Inumuta concluded, looking up from his phone, "He does not care about her physical form unless it is in trouble. He was pulled in by her strength, devotion, and inner determination. As much as I do not want to agree with you Sanageyama, it seems like he saw himself in her, and she in him, and it finally clicked into place"

Nonon groaned. "Geez, you make this sound like some super-deep, overemotional fictional teenage romance doomed to end like a sappy movie. Blech! Don't overdo it. So yeah, maybe they saw themselves in each other but beyond that is just how it evolved, right Lady Satsuki?"

"Why are you focusing on the starter chemistry when you guys can do what you do best and badger Gamagoori over the fact that he secretly asked our enemy's No-Star best friend out on a date and ended up calling it official without you even realizing it until their second date?" Satsuki commented, keeping her eyes on the couple still ignoring the Elite Four. "And also the fact that he's showing his reserved side to you right now and is vulnerable to your verbal nuances, Nonon?"

The Elite were speechless, incapacitated by their queen's facts. They really hadn't done any badgering or torture for information yet! Nonon smirked after breaking through her initial distress and cupped her hands around her mouth, preparing for a shout that would wake the entire Academy.

"Gamagoori, can you really be that clumsy when she's wet?" she shouted, breaking everyone out of their stupors. Gamagoori as the question hit his brain and the hidden message snapped at him, his face turning bright red on cue. Mako looked at him and then to Nonon, confused at why he was blushing. Inumuta and Sanageyama hid into their arms as they attempted to contain their laughter, all the while Satsuki chuckled softly into the back of her hand. Nonon never changed, and the hilarity continued when the fight continued well into the night.

By the time night had fully fallen and the moon provided lunar light for the glass-protected room, Mako had fallen asleep curled up in one of the deckchairs, Gamagoori's Three-Star top draped over her as a blanket. Sanageyama had fled into his actual room as night fell to avoid Inumuta more and to call it a night so he could heal. Nonon left reluctantly as she wanted to walk back to the lift station with Satsuki but the queen wanted to watch Gamagoori and Mako out.

Gamagoori gathered up Mako gently into his arms, Mako quickly adjusting her place until her cheek was resting on his chest. Satsuki patiently waited in the elevator with two bags of their clothes as Gamagoori carried sleeping Mako into the elevator as softly as he could without waking her.

"Mhrhmm... Gamagoori..." Mako mumbled in her sleep, shuffling around in his arms. Satsuki smiled and looked at Gamagoori who couldn't keep his eyes off of his girlfriend. The elevator dinged and they arrived at the station to their rooms.

"I'll message her family that she's staying here for the night. Get her and you to bed" Satsuki ordered, moving out of the elevator with the clothes bags. Gamagoori thanked her softly and gladly carried Mako into his elevator and descended down into his rooms. Satsuki watched the elevator leave before quickly disposing of the clothing bags, setting them down the chute for cleaning and delivery, and climbed into her elevator and watching with little interest as the doors closed and rose her up into her private room.

"Soroi, can you get Inumuta on private webcam for me?" Satsuki asked as she stepped into her bedroom, shedding the bathing suit off and depositing it into her hamper. She donned her usual white robe and sat in one of the rotating chairs in her study, taking her teacup from Soroi promptly.

"At once, Lady Satsuki"

Inumuta answered her call quickly. "You called, Lady Satsuki?"

"Be sure to keep the cameras off Mako and Gamagoori for a while. They deserve their privacy"

"... of course. Should I turn them off now?"

"Tomorrow. Good night Inumuta, forgive me for the interruption"

"No issue at all. Good night, Lad Satsuki" Inumuta gave a soft bow to before typing something down on the keyboard before him and the screen returning to black.

The call disconnected and Satsuki sighed, sinking into her chair and sipping at her tea again. Now she could rest a little easier. She booted up her internal computer, searching for last night's video-audio files of their date and without another thought deleted them. She had listened to the audio, made sure that they enjoyed their time, nothing more. Inumuta took data from the audio and left the rest to her. She wasn't going to watch it anyway; it was an invasion of privacy she would not cross. Audio? That she could do, and simply give a modest guess at what was occurring. Seeing it happen seemed to far, and she would leave it that way.

She sipped at her tea for a moment. "... They really do seem similar"

Gamagoori sat laid out on his couch, staring into the small fire he started in his fireplace. He felt uncomfortable for some reason with lying down with Mako in the same bed tonight and decided to just let her use it. He knew he shouldn't be so worried but he felt it right that she got some privacy to sleep in peace. Yet at the same time all he wanted to do was to sleep with her, keeping her warm with his body, her small form pressed up against his chest. Now he felt dumb as hell for staying out in the living room. He walked over to the fire and dimmed it down to nearly dead, and returned to the couch, yawning softly. He ought to move back into the bedroom, but he knew he should stay out and let her sleep in peace, and he started his earlier inner battle again. HE quickly pushed it aside, deciding to stay out of the bedroom and started to get comfortable on his couch.

"... Gamagoori?"

Gamagoori sat up from the couch and found Mako standing in the hallway clad in the shirt he had put her in, and a small blanket wrapped around her shoulders. She looked on the verge of tears and Gamagoori was by her side brushing the little tears building away.

She cuddled up to his chest as he neared her, prompting him to hug her softly.

"Why are you out here on the couch? You can join me in your room. Please?" Mako asked him, tugging at his arm to join her. He kissed the top of her head and followed her back into the bedroom, climbing in alongside her. She immediately curled up against his expansive chest, sighing in obvious relief that he was there with her. He draped an arm over her and curled the other underneath her pillow. He could see her look up at him with a sleepy expression, and saw the expansive smile across her face before she let her eyes flutter close, and her breathing softened, already falling quickly into sleep. He rested his chin on top of her head and let himself slip into sleep without notice.

Gamagoori had to admit that even with the other Elite's intervention and commentary on his relationship, today could even be called their third date. And it went rather well, and ended like this was the cherry on top. He was liking this very much.

He could go as far as saying he loved this. He loved this and loved her.

One Step Back, Two Steps Forward

"Yay! Back in One-Star condos! Woohoo! Mom, Daddy, I'm home!"

Mako was running up to her family from Gamagoori's car as he got out, watching her run to her family waiting for her with wide arms. Her family accepted her back home with the cheers of a roaring crowd, loud enough to have some One-Star students open their windows on the first floor and peer out on what was happening. As the excitement died down, Gamagoori grew brave and stepped up to the family slowly, staring down the One-Stars scrutinizing him and the Mankanshoku Family from behind their windows. The One-Star audience hid away behind their windows and doors, fearful of their Disciplinary Chairmen's wrath if they tried to enter in on the interactions. Mako noticed him first and waved for him to come over quickly, which Gamagoori did. He kept control of his size as best he could, hoping that he did not intimidate her family.

"Mom, Dad, this is Ira Gamagoori! He can be intimidating most of the time but don't take it to heart! He's actually nice! Gamagoori, this is my mom, dad, and my younger brother Mataro"

Gamagoori bowed on instinct, giving his respects. "It's an honor to meet you, Mr. and Mrs. Mankanshoku."

Sukuyo stepped up first, smiling from ear to ear and offering a hand. "It's an honor to officially meet Mako's boyfriend, and please call me Sukuyo."

Gamagoori's heart skipped a beat when the words 'Mako' and 'boyfriend' appeared in the same sentence, and his blush returned twofold when he saw Mako blushing the same but not denying it. She looked up at him for a moment before stepping up beside him, his fingers moving across his palm before they interlaced with his fingers. He had to smile, accepting the facts as they were.

"Sukuyo then. A pleasure" Gamagoori replied, shaking her offered hand, "Forgive me for delaying our meeting for such an extended time"

"At least you are here!" Barazo said, stepping up, "Any person no matter how close they are to Lady Satsuki must pass our tests to have official dating status with our little girl. You, Ira Gamagoori, are no exception. Do you willingly allow yourself to go through such torture as to date Mako Mankanshoku?"

Gamagoori stepped up, not letting go of Mako's hand. "Hmpf, torture? You do not understand the meaning of the word! I have been subjugated to the blunt attacks of Satsuki Kiryuin! Your so-called tests will leave nothing but dirt on me, easily brushed off my hardened mind and body. I consent to your tests, Barazo Mankanshoku, for my chance of officially dating your daughter!"

"Good then!" Barazo announced, stepping up to Gamagoori, "You should not take these tests lightly! Two boys and one girl have not survived the tests so far and even with your size and intimidating air and facial expressions, I do not expect you to come out of this unchanged. You are being tested by Back-Alley Doctor Barazo Mankanshoku, and housewife and croquette master Sukuyo Mankanshoku!"

"Do not forget Honnō City gang leader Mataro Mankanshoku!" Mataro piped in, a bark from Guts accompanying his declaration, "You have to pass the siblings tests as well, Elite Disciplinary Chairman!"

"I accept all of your tests! If I must go through physical and psychological pain to have the chance to date Mako then I will do so until I am fit in your eyes to do so! Any pain is worth it in the end if the end prize is your daughter's heart!"

Mako looked up again at Gamagoori in complete awe, tears suddenly blinding her vision. "G-Gamagoori..."

Gamagoori squeezed Mako's hand, smiling down at her, not regretting a single word he said. Sure, he was flustered as hell on the inside and now was having trouble controlling the blush flashing on his cheeks like a broken streetlight, but it was worth it if he proved himself to her family to the best of his ability. He could show his resolve to keep her safe, sound, and loved, and show what he can offer and hope that it will lead him to victory and acceptance with her family.

"Oh! Dad, please don't do the 'Exploratory Surgery' test! I want him alive! No surgeries, no blood samples, no evasive, permanent bodily harming tests!" Mako demanded, looking to her dad. He went to respond but Mako cut him off.

"And no, you can not hook him up to the electric wiring you have hidden! No breaking anything, no blood-letting, nothing that will put scars on him, including mentally, emotionally and psychologically!"

Gamagoori suddenly did not want to walk in to the Mankanshoku family condo at that moment, but from the way Mako was smiling at him, that familiar friendly glint in her eyes, he knew he would be alright if he took the tests her family laid out for him. Mako let go of his hand and ushered him down for a quick kiss on his cheek before pushing him closer to her family. Sukuyo offered a space to let him in and the family piled into the Apartment complex toward their condo. Mataro and Mako ran in as soon as the door opened, Mako flying for their couch like her life depended on it, curling around a pillow as she turned on the television to a random channel. Mataro went right for the fridge, digging through it and dragging out pudding cups for the whole family, handing them out until two remained in his arms, and Gamagoori had been left out of the pudding distribution.

"Mataro! Don't leave Gamagoori out!" Mako shouted, sitting up from her laid-out position on the couch, pudding spoon sticking out of her mouth.

'I'm being tested already. This is part of his test' Gamagoori figured out. He knelt to get closer to Mataro's level, and extended out an

arm, opening his palm face-up. *'I must abide to his tricks to succeed.'*

"Mind if I have one?" he asked. Mataro gave a devious smile before lifting a pudding cup up teasingly, waving it side to side to taunt the larger man.

"Got anything in return for me, Elite man?" Mataro asked, chuckling under his breath. Gamagoori's face started to fire up in fury, unamused by the boy's games but he got it together before he blasted at him. He had to get used to this, he realized, if he was going to get on Mankanshoku Family's good side and get her family's blessing to date her. He reached into his right back pocket and pulled out his wallet, planting two 100 yen coins in Mataro's open hand.

"You know what's up! Here you go!" Mataro said, placing the pudding cup in Gamagoori's open hand before raising his new coins up and rushing out of the door, claiming that he would be back with snacks. Mako smiled at him and gave him a thumbs up, her spook wiggling around in her mouth. Gamagoori gave a sigh and grabbed a spoon from the kitchen, digging into the small cup with a victorious vigor.

'Part one of Mataro's tests passed. Now what will her parents do to test me?'

"Ah! Gamagoori, do you smell that?" Mako explained, standing up on the couch, throwing her empty pudding cup like a basketball into the trash, and waving around her spoon after her throw sunk into its target.

Gamagoori gave a deep inhale of the air, and was met with several smells. Vanilla wafted from his left, most likely from Mako. Chocolate, from his unfinished pudding in his hand. And something vaguely familiar from the dining room just around the corner, but he could not put a name to the smell. He could identify potatoes among the concoction, meat...

Croquettes. Cooking Oil. Steamed Vegetables. Mashed Potatoes. And his stomach agreed with what his nose was picking up, and his stomach growled to show it.

"Lunch~" Mako moaned, jumping from the couch and running into the dining room. Gamagoori quickly followed and found Mako jumping around in her chair, waiting for her mom to dish out the plethora of food she had prepared. Gamagoori went to get the seat next to Mako but apparently their dog beat him to it, proudly taking the seat with a purposely bark at him to let him know. He did not even bother worrying about it, but instead rounded the table and decided to help Sukuyo set the table and spread out the food, using his skills he had learned from his short time helping his mother some time ago. Sukuyo was grateful for his help, and with it they were finished setting the table full of food before Mataro came back a few minutes later. Everyone sat down, Gamagoori between Barazo and Sukuyo, and dug in to the food, starting their usual race to eat as much as you could.

Gamagoori tried to match their speed, watching as the pile of croquettes never seemed to end or even have a dent made in it, shoveling in croquette after croquette. Croquette, rice, vegetables, croquettes, repeat. Mako was eyeing him across the table suspiciously before continuing her feast. Gamagoori eventually slowed down before his stomach could implode by the weight and number of croquettes he had consumed, and simply went to his rice and the occasional croquette if he could stomach it. Mako reached out across the table and presented her empty rice bowl to him, her eyes directing him to the pile of rice behind him. He refilled the bowl quickly and handed it back to Mako, watching her wolf down more and more croquettes and rice. He finished his bowl and politely set his chopsticks down, announcing his thanks for the meal as the rest of the family did the same.

"Mataro! Where are you going now?" Sukuyo snapped, keeping the young gang leader from moving any closer to the hallway. He turned around coyly before letting the object he had in his arms slip to the

floor, and it obviously did not belong in the house from the condition it was in. Gamagoori's inner disciplinary self fired up and he dragged Mataro by the cheek up to his place in the kitchen.

"Why have you been stealing Mataro Mankanshoku?" Gamagoori asked darkly, taking the object back. Mataro shrunk down in fear, trying to explain only to have the other side of his cheek be pulled by Sukuyo, earning a loud chorus of 'ow, ow, ow' streaming from Mataro.

"Mataro, what have I told you about stealing now that we're in One-Star territory?" Sukuyo asked with a smile, putting him in a choke hold. Mataro beat against his mother's arms, choking out 'not to' for his answer. Sukuyo released him after Gamagoori took the object from the floor, both older adults watched Mataro run off. Gamagoori gladly gave Sukuyo the item.

"Thank you Gamagoori for dealing with him" Sukuyo thanked him. Gamagoori bowed for a moment.

"It is no matter, Sukuyo. If he continues to do such without good reason, please tell me. I'll find a way to stop it"

Sukuyo smiled wide at him. "Of course!"

Barazo stepped in with them. "Gamagoori! Mako wanted to talk to you, she's in the living room!"

"Thank you Barazo" Gamagoori said before walking calmly into the living room, finding Mako sitting on the top of the couch, kicking her legs up and down in patient joy.

"Gam-a-go-ri!" Mako chanted as she threw herself into his arms as he came closer. He lifted her up and set her back on top of the couch, putting his arms beside her to keep her locked in place. She peppered his forehead with kisses as soon as he submitted to the request, giggling as Gamagoori flushed at the cute display she began.

"You wanted to talk to me?" Gamagoori asked, getting Mako to cease her kisses. She nodded quickly and rose up the phone she was given earlier that morning by Inumuta before leaving the tower.

"I got a call from Lady Satsuki. She wanted to talk to me so I have to leave you with my family until I can come back"

Gamagoori nodded, understanding the announcement but another part of him was yelling about going with her to avoid being in the hands of her father alone. Mako seemed to be able to read his mind, and told him that Barazo would not dare hurt or touch a hair on you now that she has expressed her feelings on the subject. He was safe in her family's hands. She quickly kissed him as her family crowded the hallway to the living room, smirking into the purposeful kiss. Gamagoori stayed ignorant of her parent's voyeur position, and kissed Mako back without restraint. Mako backed out of it before it could grow anymore heated.

"I got to go" she whispered against his lips, "Try not to change size and break the apartment, 'kay?"

"Alright. Inform Lady Satsuki of my location" Gamagoori responded, letting Mako slide off the top of the couch and toward the door.

"Inumuta has it already, so you're good! I'll be back home later!"

Mako left the house with a cheerful last word and Gamagoori was left within the controls of the Mankanshoku Family. He turned to face them, as he had noticed their presence when Mako had left, and prepared for the attack due to the kiss. None hit him in the form he was looking for; instead, Barazo wanted to indulge him in some stories from his time as the Honnō City Back-Alley doctor. Sukuyo sighed deeply as the men took their places across from each other in the living room.

"I'll make some tea while you play 'Who has the grossest story'" Sukuyo said, turning to the kitchen. Gamagoori held his tongue and his gag reflex back.

For the briefest second, Gamagoori regretted dropping Mako off at her home, but quickly redeemed himself as he sank into the couch and face Barazo's stories as he should as a boyfriend in testing. He opened his ears and let Barazo's stories sink into his memory.

When Mako eventually reached the lift plaza, she was met by the concerned faces of Nonon and Inumuta and she was flanked by them as she walked out of the cable car.

"Why do you guys look so worried?" Mako asked. Nonon did not answer her, her concerned look turning dark suddenly. Inumuta stepped in before Nonon exploded at Mako.

"We've been denied access to Lady Satsuki's quarters, and we had been asked to see her. It's highly unusual of her to do such without forewarning"

Nonon hissed. "Plus the only access allowed pass in use is *yours*, slacker. We can't take it from you, so you're the only one with access. Go"

Mako lifted up her access pass and quickly ran to Satsuki's lift, the glass doors opening for her. She turned back to the Elite Four to find them urging her into the lift. Mako stepped in and let the lift do its work, the glass darkening as she rose up into the tower and toward Satsuki. Random things were running through her mind, including how Gamagoori was fairing with her family, but they all collected back to Satsuki. What was happening with her to lock out even her Elite? The elevator dinged and opened on Satsuki's floor, but it was dead silence. Nothing. Mako stepped in to the living rooms and looked around quickly, finding no trace of Satsuki.

"Lady Satsuki? Lady Satsuki, are you here?" Mako poked her head into a few of the rooms and continued to survey the area. Nothing stirred, nothing moved, and only the AC's soft noises broke the pregnant silence. Mako contemplated about leaving and coming back later, but something told her to stay inside and investigate why

Satsuki would lock out the others even though she called them. She pushed a door a little farther open and stepped inside. As the door slid shut, she could hear a strangled cry come from within one of the numerous rooms.

"Lady Satsuki?" Mako called again, walking through the living room again toward what looked like Satsuki's real bedroom. The cries, which she could tell now were definitely being hidden and pushed away. She stopped as she entered the kitchen, freezing when she realized she could be invading the privacy of the queen of the school. She started to turn to leave.

"W-WAIT! Wait, whoever's there"

Mako froze on command, looking for the source of the cry. Another strangled cry led Mako into Lady Satsuki's study, or at least she thought was one with the amount of monitors showing figures and papers, and the clean cherry wood desk facing the monitor wall. Mako looked around the medium-sized rooms, noting that a trail of papers flowed down from the desk in a manner unlike Lady Satsuki's evident neatness. She spotted the edges of Junketsu behind the chair in the room and she slowly walked around it and found Lady Satsuki backed against a wall, hands curled into her hair as if she were stressed.

"Lady Satsuki, what's wrong, did someone hurt you?" Mako cried, kneeling down in front of her and extending a hand out to her.

"Don't touch me!" Satsuki yelled, showing her tear-covered face to Mako. Mako gasped as she saw how broken-down the Student Body President had become. Satsuki gasped out her next few breaths before curling up from Mako, face pressed into her knees. Mako retracted her hand and watched Satsuki attempt to curl up into herself. Mako couldn't understand what was happening or why it was happening. Lady Satsuki seemed perfectly fine, but why would she be in such a broken down state. Mako sat down on her bum and simply observed, not sure what to do now. Nothing seemed to click to the reason behind the breakdown.

"Is it okay if I try something Lady Satsuki?" Mako asked. Satsuki peeked from her tucked up state and nodded reluctantly, curling back up. Mako reached out to her and set her hand on the top of Satsuki's head, not curling her fingers into the soft raven-black hair or tickling the top of her scalp. She simply set her hand palm-down on the top of her head. Satsuki's head snapped up to look at her, and Mako accordingly moved to stay on her head. Satsuki slowly uncurled, not lowering her gaze from Mako. She slowly slid the hand off of her, her eyes now looking around at random things in the room but always fell back on Mako, as if she were expecting her to do something against her will.

"Go" Satsuki growled, her stare turning predatory. Mako didn't flinch back but did scoot back a bit. She didn't see Junketsu stare at her with a deadly glint.

"But you're-"

"GO!" Satsuki roared, one hand clutching at one of Junketsu's eyes. Mako scampered back enough to stand and started to walk out before she would face the wrath of Lady Satsuki. She slowed her pace so she could stall, hoping that Satsuki would call her back and she could comfort her like she wanted to do. She got no other words thrown at her, and Satsuki slowly broke down again, that one hand never leaving Junketsu. Mako peered from around the corner of the door sadly. She was ordered to leave so she would leave, and turned around to leave Lady Satsuki in peace with her demons. She heard the gasp come from the room just in time to stop and turn right back around and hear Satsuki call back for her.

"Mako, wait! Wait, come back... f-forgive me for my rudeness"

Mako poked her head around the corner for a moment before returning to her spot in front of Satsuki, sitting down on her haunches. "It's okay! You're having an anxiety attack, sometimes space is the answer to help get calm. Sometimes you need someone to help you through it!"

Satsuki's breath hadn't calmed but her body had, stretched out across the floor, back still against the wall for support. She looked at Mako curiously, still watching her every movement just in case something happened. The tension fled out of her body with each calming breath she let in and out, and Satsuki finally beckoned Mako closer, accepting the warm hug Mako gave her, her small arms hovered and laid over her shoulders in a comforting manner. She let herself relax as the effects of the attack died down and away at last, freeing Satsuki's mind from the foggy cloud that had covered it.

"Thank you for coming, Mako" Satsuki murmured. Mako nodded in acknowledgment and then withdrew the hug, sitting in front of Satsuki respectively.

"Um... do you want me to make some tea, Lady Satsuki? Would that help?" Mako asked. Satsuki matched her gaze on to Mako and let a small smile break across her lips.

"Tea sounds perfect"

Satsuki settled into her living room loveseat as Mako prepared tea in her kitchen, quickly filling her tea kettle with water and standing at attention as it boiled. Satsuki had little on her mind, but the details were more important. She had not expected to have a delayed panic attack, nor to the degree it was at. She also did not expect her Kamui to try and leech off of her weakened mental state. Junketsu was now firmly in its case, bolted down until further use was needed. She adjusted her robe accordingly, sinking into the soft leather of her seat. At least the panic and fear was gone, and she could relax back into her formal self once more. As she opened her eyes, setting back her thought for the moment, a teacup and saucer were offered to her, filled with fresh steaming tea and optional milk.

"I brewed what I could find. I hope it isn't horrible, I'm not used to high-end tea and things!" Mako told her as Satsuki poured in milk and accepted the teacup and saucer with a nod. Mako set the serving tray she had presented the tea on on the coffee table in front of her, taking a seat beside Satsuki, giving moderate room between

them. Mako watched with apprehension as Satsuki raised the cup to her lips as sipped at the tea, hoping that she did not make disgusting tea for the person who kept her family under a solid roof.

"Sweet" Satsuki murmured as she replaced the cup to its saucer, "yet softly bitter. Balanced. Impressive tea, Mako"

"T-thank you Lady Satsuki!" Mako quickly responded. Satsuki let a chuckle pass through her lips.

"It's alright, Mako. A single bad serving of tea wouldn't have costed you everything. This is, however, well done tea. I applaud it; a good thing after what has transpired"

Mako smiled happily as silence joined their conversation, the two simply drinking tea and chatting in minimal doses, keeping the air and mood light and favorable. Not a single word about what Mako had seen came to the table, and both were glad for it. Sure, Mako brought up the fact that Nonon and Inumuta were growing anxious as she kept lockdowns on their access to her, but not once did Satsuki's panic attack come into play.

"Do not tell anyone of what you witness, please" Satsuki finally said, breaking the unspoken honor not to speak of it between them. Mako nodded in confirmation.

"Of course not! It's obvious that you don't want this coming into the open so I won't let it. If... if I may ask... what triggered it?" Mako responded, looking into her nearly empty cup. She moved as Satsuki gladly poured more for her.

"It was backlash... from yesterday's changing incident" Satsuki revealed. Mako immediately set her cup on the table.

"You mean I caused this? Forgive me, Lady Satsuki!"

Satsuki watched with neutral expression as Mako went down on one knee, giving a salute and bow to her to help cushion her apology for

the mess. Submission in its purest form, a sincere apology for triggering her anxiety, and honest regret for her actions. Mako was surprising her in her hidden talents. Satsuki forgave her with incredible warmth, simply telling her the trigger came from a deep history issue and that she was free from any prosecution or damage. Mako simply had to keep what she saw secret and leave it be. Soon after their agreements, Mako helped clean up everything with Satsuki and promptly left to return to Gamagoori, leaving Satsuki to her peace and quiet of her personal space.

In which Satsuki finally allowed Nonon and Inumuta access once more, and greeted her anxious comrades as they arrived with sincerity.

"Dad, Mom, Gamagoori, I'm home!" Mako called as she entered their apartment, peeling off her jacket and hanging it up. "Ah, Gamagoori! Why are you sitting out here alone?"

Gamagoori was indeed alone; sitting on one of the living room couches with his chin in one hand, looking bored yet anxious, an emotion that troubled Mako. He smiled as she walked up to him and glomped him, making sure she had his shoulders under her control. He easily shrugged her off and hugged her close.

"So what happened?" Mako asked seating herself on Gamagoori's lap, her legs on either side of him. He quickly moved her so she was beside him to avoid any incident with boner-popping and tried to cough away the rising awkwardness. Guts jumped up on his shoulder, as the dog always seemed to do, and looked around him at Mako. He patted Guts softly before returning his attention to Mako.

"Well... your father has some interesting recollections of past incidents in his work to tell me. How his actions haven't been reported to us is either pure luck or stupidity"

Mako chuckled. "Well don't take all of them so hard! Sure, he's killed more people than he's saved but he's done some miracle work too!"

"So he told" Gamagoori murmured, "Your mother left to buy more cooking oil and supplies for dinner and your father had a call he had to answer. We have the house to ourselves or we could go out before they return"

Mako weighed her options for a moment, humming as she shifted between her thoughts about each side she could choose. She was heading toward the going out option when her memories reminded her of something she had promised to do, and she decided what to do. She looked toward Gamagoori and scooted closer, leaning on his arm and shoulder.

"Stay here..." she replied. "Remember the bath house? I said we would try!"

Before Gamagoori could get his face the color of an apple, Mako had pulled his face toward his, her right hand against his cheek to lead him if need be, waiting for him to make the first move. His face went bright red on cue, trying to get out of the situation quickly, but found himself stuck within the hands of Mako. He closed his eyes for a breath, controlling his rapidly spiraling emotions, and finally taking Mako by the lips, her hand relocating around his neck while his grappled to her waist. Their lips slid along each other in harmony and perfect sync, mapping each little curve of their lips. Mako took the liberty to tilt her head to one side, deepening their kiss. Air grew to short supply and they quickly ended their make out session, breathed a bit, and then continued on, neither rejecting the idea of ending this any time soon while they were away from scathing eyes.

As they sunk into a rhythm, Gamagoori tested the waters once more, letting his tongue adventure out to brush against Mako's lower lip. She did the same thing as before, gasping softly and breaking their lips from each other, but she came back and allowed the kiss to evolve, her tongue reaching out and poking around as well. Inexperience on both ends of the kiss left the now french kiss in fumbles, and both shortly parted with thin lines of spit running down their chins. Both panted softly before letting soft chuckles loose, realizing that they had done that. Gamagoori wiped the trail leading

down Mako's chin and recaptured her lips in his name, tongue reaching out as Mako realized his intent and matched his antics with her tongue. Although still inexperienced, they figured out quickly what to do with their tongues, and their kiss slowly led to more.

Mako inched her way from his side to his lap, her legs on either side of him. Gamagoori's hands moved seemingly by themselves, moving up under her shirt slowly, resting near her navel. After multitudes of making out and barely breathing, Mako parted from the kiss, bracing herself up with Gamagoori's shoulders, staring deeply into his eyes. Gamagoori was in the same state of euphoric daze. Wordlessly, Mako stood up and led Gamagoori through the house to her room, shutting the door behind him and going back to making out, moving backwards until Mako and Gamagoori hit the bottom bunk bed, he hovering over her. Mako gasped as she realized the position they were in, looking up at him wide-eyed for a breath before taking Gamagoori's face in her hands and bringing her to her level, their lips molding together once more.

"Mako..." Gamagoori murmured, parting from the kiss to look down at her. Laid out beneath him, Mako seemed more delicate than ever. She smiled warmly, reaching up and hugging him down to her level, his elbows keeping him above her. Gamagoori leaned his head down to Mako's shoulder, relaxing into her grip. Mako did not let go for a while, simply holding Gamagoori against her. When she let him go, Gamagoori sat up alongside Mako, who had curled up on the bed. He softly petted her head, smiling when she giggled at the motion. He gently kissed her again, this time retreating before she could catch him into another make-out session, but Mako was tricky, grabbing the front of his shirt and pulling him closer to her, but still out of reach of her lips from her comfortable position on her back. She tugged on his shirt to get him to lower down but all he did was smile like a sly bastard and stayed in place, hovering over her with one hand planted beside her head to keep him in place.

"Get down here!" Mako grumbled, tugging at his shirt relentlessly in the hopes that he would budge, but to no avail. She had to take new

tactics. She eyed the hand to her side and a plan soon came to mind. She sat up just a bit, and brought her left arm swinging back to that bracing arm, knocking it loose and getting Gamagoori to tumble down closer, close enough for her to flatten out on her back again and have the kiss she requested and wanted.

Eagerly repeating their steps, they once again went into a make out session, tongue included. Some skill had been gained from the amount of frenching they were doing, so the kiss went from near hit-and-miss first time kiss to solid, clean french kissing. Mako grappled to his shoulder again, keeping him just barely hovering over her, his arms now bent on either side of her head, his lips doing the talking he wanted to do. He carefully balanced himself on one arm as he moved the other to sweep down to Mako's hips, his fingers tugging her shirt up enough to slip under the material.

"Wait..." Mako murmured, putting a hand against Gamagoori's cheek to quickly free her mouth. Gamagoori flushed red as he removed his hand from under her shirt, already apologizing for the rude and inappropriate actions. Mako quickly flailed however to counteract his statements, claiming that it wasn't rude or inappropriate at all, just surprising and unexpected.

"Still, forgive me for trying to push you into it" Gamagoori asked, combing back parts of her bangs behind her ear. Mako cupped the hand in both of hers.

"You didn't push me! You caught me by surprise! It's all right. I just don't want to go that far yet, Mako doesn't want to rush this. I want to spend time like this just kissing and cuddling and going out on random dates and doing pointless little things for a bit, until I feel ready to go to the next base"

Gamagoori genuinely smiled, and Mako couldn't help but gasp softly at the first complete smile she had seen from him.

"I understand completely, Mankanshoku. If that is your boundary, then I shall not cross it without your permission to do so. I swear

upon my place in the Academy that I will not break this vow to keep any sexually connoted material, actions or otherwise away until your profuse approval"

Mako cuddled up against him. "And I will not do anything like that either unless you ask or give permission for me to do so."

Mako entangled their hands and lifted them up, looking at the way Gamagoori's hands nearly completely enveloped her small, little hands. She looked to the side to find Gamagoori looking at the mas well, resting his chin on her shoulder to get a closer look. Mako kissed his cheek a few times before rubbing her head against his, settling within his lap. He chuckled at her random yet precise movements to find the exactly right spot to sit in his lap and found amusement in each and every under-the-breath grumble she made about how his legs were too muscley to lay on. Eventually she found a spot comfortable enough and curled up against his chest, and Gamagoori laid out as best he could on the small bed they found themselves resting on.

"You're heart's beating really quickly... ," Mako murmured sleepily, "Is there a hamster wheel going around and around in there?"

Gamagoori ran a hand through her hair without a word. "Maybe so. Maybe you're the reason the hamster's running so much?"

"Is that a good thing?"

"Yes. Yes it is..." Gamagoori couldn't shake the feeling rising up in his chest; this sudden bravery of admitting something to her. He felt it warm everything in him, and felt that it had made his heart beat even louder for Mako to hear. He felt no embarrassment, neither fear nor constriction.

"The hamster wheel's spinning really *really* fast now" Mako commented, "Are you thinking of me?"

Gamagoori swallowed away the sudden lump in his throat. "Yes... I am thinking of you, Mako"

"And what about me are you thinking about?"

"... that I... I love you Mako Mankanshoku"

Mako's heart leaped up into her throat, and her own heart hamster wheel sped up to a hundred and twenty miles an hour.

Silent Before The Explosion

Quick thing before you read on: I do use the Japanese version of a 'date' once. It doesn't mean going out with someone with romantic purpose. A friendly outing, for this fic at least.

I also figured out where this story is within the canon. It doesn't fall anywhere. It's more of an Alternate Universe or Parallel Timeline, thought more to the Parallel Timeline. Basically a story that has all the same essentials (characters, major plot points, and certain places, a few other things) but in a complete new order and direction including new plot twists and expansion. Ends the sort of same way, and by that I mean the Life Fibers gone, Ragyo killed, etc.

Mako could not hear anything outside the words Gamagoori had just spoken and the frantic stuttered beating of her heart. She could barely even hear the thumping of Gamagoori's heart in her ear as she lay in stunned silence against his chest, trying to compute Gamagoori's confession. All she could hear was the beating of her heart and those same words again and again, ringing out like old church bells calling to its masses, and never had she ever felt this weird about them before. Sure, she dreamed of the day that she would have someone admit those words to her, but she never expected them to numb her to the core.

'I love you'

She couldn't think of anything to say, or anything to do at that moment. She was frozen with the sudden flashing of emotion and intimacy the words brought her. All her body could do in reaction was fire her heart up into an alarming pace and quicken her breath, her fingers twitching nervously against Gamagoori's chest. She could not react correctly for the life of her, and she stayed put where she was, internally screaming about the change of events. Somewhere within

her panicking mind, a little part of her was squealing and rolling around for the fact that he admitted loving her. She didn't have to worry that he hated her or started getting tired of her antics and personality. Much of her was simply too numb to react or suddenly too fried to give him the response he deserved.

What worried her more was that she could not return the words. Why wouldn't she speak up and tell him back? Why would she lie there and do nothing?

Why couldn't she say I love you back? Why was her tongue so caught that she couldn't even bring up the courage and resolve to tell him she loved him back?

Gamagoori let the stirring silence continue with a great patience, letting the confession settle in Mako. He would wait out for her verbal response as long as he could stand, as he had planned. He had this nagging feeling right before he told her that she would take a while to respond or react, and it was correct in its prediction. Even though he was slowly losing hope, slowly mind you, he would stay resolute and await Mako's answer to his confession. He adjusted his arms so that one cradled Mako enough to keep her on his chest while the other rested above his head, hand tucked under his head to lift it just enough to see Mako close her eyes and felt the accompanying shiver.

Mako still could not bring it upon herself to actually answer him! She was infuriated with herself but something within her kept the words down in her gut where they festered with a sickly and burning pain. The words would not form strong enough to leave, tongue-tied enough to keep her from saying anything for the next few minutes. Mako and Gamagoori lay there for several more minutes in silence, Gamagoori's hopes slowly burning away as Mako looked conflicted, angry, then depressed and a thousand other emotions at all once and then one after the other in a constant loop of unreadable, unpredictable emotion waterfall. He would give her time, he reminded himself, so she didn't feel rushed to answer. He wanted the truth from her, a real answer and rebuttal to his proclamation. He

hoped though that she said it back, tying the rope he threw out between them.

Eventually Mako simply sighed and sat up, only to groan and rest her head back on to his chest. Tears shined in the corners of her eyes, the corners of her lips twitching into a frown he didn't like to see on her usually smiling lips. Gamagoori was growing more anxious as the seconds ticked on, silence still the ruler in the space between and around them.

When Mako sat up again with a glint in her eyes, her hands raised up in her all familiar hallelujah pose, he couldn't help but smile.

"Gamagoori, I do not think that confessing this early in our relationship is good! Things could change and then we'd be left broken-hearted and then everything would be messed up and-"

Gamagoori cut her moment off by sitting up and taking her head in his hands. Mako blinked several times and her tears fell without notice.

"I meant what I said, Mako. It had been burning in my chest for a long time now. I couldn't keep it hidden anymore. I love you, Mako, and I will not take it back or make it disappear. I felt that you should know where I stand and how I feel." Gamagoori's voice was unusually thick, his emotions pouring into each word he spoke. "You don't know how much I do."

Mako's smile came back tenfold as she wrapped her hands around his, barely able to get her fingers around the large calloused palms. She simply sat there between his legs, back in her thoughts. Gamagoori waited like before in silent patience for her response, his index fingers rubbing pointless shapes and things on her temples. She closed her eyes a minute later, her smile sliding off her lips into a neutral line. The room went silent, anticipation warming the air to a boil, making the hairs on the back of their necks rise at attention. When she opened her eyes again, he noticed immediately that they lacked their usual fire and passion. They were giving him a look of

defeat. He understood the message behind her silent call, and hugged her close again.

"You're not ready to say it yet," He stated. It wasn't a question, and it sent a bitter pang through her heart. *At least he did not sound hurt by the revelation*, Mako reminded herself, *h e probably predicted that I wouldn't be ready* . She nodded numbly, burying her face into his chest. Her own chest constricted as he figured out the truth, unable to get those three little words out from her heart. They kept on getting stuck right before she could say them. She knew that she loved him but why was she keeping them down in chains.

His thumb brushed over the corners of her eyes where tears had begun to fall. "Mako, it's alright. The last thing I want to do is pressure you into saying it. You need time to process it and let it settle. I will wait for your answer, whether it be returned or denied. Just please... don't say something you'll regret or say anything just to make me happy. Tell me... tell me what your heart truly says, like you always do."

Mako nodded quickly and wrapped her arms around his neck, burying her face into his shoulder. She left chaste little kisses up his neck.

"I know I feel the same Ira. I do, but the words are stuck in my throat. They don't want to come out yet... it feels like food stuck and blocking out what needs to get out," Mako admitted. She felt Gamagoori's shiver roll over his shoulders and through his body. She admitted it there, but Gamagoori wanted to hear the magical three words. Mako knew he would want them, but still they sat locked in place in her throat, rebellious in her attempts to make it move.

"I must have jumped the gun if you're still choking on it. I already did that for about a week." Gamagoori admitted, getting Mako to laugh enough to bring a smile back to her face. Gamagoori matched it with a bigger smile, and laughed at the attempt Mako made to make her mouth wider to match his smile. He tugged at her cheeks playfully until they were in fits of building laughter, unable to handle the

absurdity of their current actions. Their pleasant laughter and peace lasted for a while until Mako was up on her feet again and stretching out her back, her shoulders popping as she reached up to the roof.

Mako hummed as she dropped her arms to her sides, smiling at Gamagoori. He returned it quickly and had enough time to intercept Mako's flying hug, sending them back on the bed, holding back laughter. When the laughter died down, Mako snuggled herself up against him again, stretching out in obvious prep for a nap. Gamagoori reluctantly joined her, wrapping one arm around the small of her back while he tucked the other under his head. Mako looked up at him with sleepy eyes, and left a lazy kiss on his lips.

"You know you're a handful to deal with, right?" Gamagoori asked, poking at Mako's forehead. She giggled and swept the appendage away, resting her hands once more against his chest and collarbone. She nodded and yawned at the same time, and left her answer at the nod as she dozed off into sleep, mumbling something about his lips. He pressed his lips against her forehead in a lingering kiss before shifting around and finding a comfortable position, tucking Mako even closer to him. He let his eyes fall without a fight and drifted off into unconsciousness, once again with the girl he loved resting right alongside him.

"Mako! You home?"

Sukuyo turned around just in time to see Ryuuko walk in and set a few bags of things on the couch. "Ah! Welcome home Ryuuko. Want some juice?"

Ryuuko smiled briefly. "Gladly. Have you seen Mako?"

"Well we just got home, so she could still be here. We were gone for nearly an hour thanks to Barazo nearly killing another patient"

Barazo poked his head out of the fridge, pudding cup and spoon in hand. "He wouldn't stop squirming like a fish! At least he survived

and paid us even with the near failure!"

Ryuuko gave a weak chuckle at the antics; how'd she know that he would try his hand at helping people in the One-Star district? She brushed off the temporary shock and focused back at the task she aimed for. She wandered deeper into the apartment, searching for her friend as she pasted into the dining room and other half of the kitchen, finding no evidence of her there. Senketsu reminded her that she was with Gamagoori the previous night when the news was given to them that they were in the One-Star condos. Ryuuko knew where to look, and paused as she took hold of their bedroom doorknob. She quietly opened the door and couldn't keep the smile off her face. She heard and felt Senketsu chuckle as they closed the door again. Ryuuko had to show her family this before the moment was broken. She quietly got her parents to follow her and peeked back into the room, looking on as spectators to the adorable scene.

Tucked up in a perfect cuddle, Gamagoori and Mako looked like they were in their own world. Gamagoori acted as a muscle wall to protect Mako, who curled up against his chest, her hands curled into non-lethal fists. Gamagoori had also reduced his size greatly and actually fit on the small bed with Mako. Mako used his arm, which partly propped his head up, as a pillow, although she moved a bit toward the actual pillow underneath them. They both were fast asleep, their breathing soft as feathers. Their feet intertwined at the foot of the bed, all the while they held each other close.

"That is so adorable," Sukuyo cooed, wiping the corners of her eyes, "Look at them."

Barazo eyed Gamagoori's hand placements sharply, making sure that he wasn't doing anything inappropriate. Sukuyo caught on and smacked an answer out of him.

"At least she looks happy with him." he said, noting the fact that both were smiling in their slumber, "and he holds her in a high position."

"Which is rare for Gamagoori. The only person he ever held this high was Satsuki." Ryuuko added. Senketsu agreed silently, keeping his eye on Barazo. They looked on at the couple for another silent minute before retreating back into the living room, allowing Gamagoori and Mako their private time. Sukuyo and Barazo were conferring quietly in the kitchen as Ryuuko took the glass of juice previously offered to her and broke in to the chocolate she bought earlier, lounging out on one of the couches. It sounded like they were approving of Gamagoori dating Mako, and it brought a smile to Ryuuko's face.

"She's happy with him..." Ryuuko whispered. Senketsu looked up at her as she went silent, staring off into space.

"Ryuuko"

"I know I shouldn't be like this, Senketsu. I'm happy that they're happy with each other. I'll survive. We're close friends still, and that gives some room between us. I'm more glad than anything that she found the person who made her the happiest."

"You provide the spirit and protection and power she needs at times, Ryuuko. She wouldn't get rid of you anyway; you're her first real friend."

Ryuuko's smile returned, and she brought her chocolate back to her lips. "Exactly. I'll protect her and bring her up until I die. Hell, maybe with Gamagoori's help, we could keep her from fighting again."

Senketsu seemed to chuckle at the notion. "It is a possibility, but I would not count on it."

Ryuuko chortled back, patting his eye. "You're probably right there, Senketsu. With the way Life Fibers work, I would count on our biggest fight coming."

"Wake up..."

"Noooo, you're warm and comfortable"

"Come on, Mako"

Mako yawned loudly and reluctantly opened her eyes, finding her gaze already locked on to Gamagoori. He was sitting up on his elbows, brushing away stray hairs out of her face, looking at her with a warm expression. She felt her face heat up at the intimate look and touches, pressing her cheek against his hand as he ran it against her face. Smiles found their places on their lips as they came together for a lazy kiss, simply enjoying the feel of each other's familiar lips.

"I like waking up like this" Mako murmured as they parted, her smile stretching from ear to ear. Gamagoori chuckled as he continued to brush Mako's bed-head hair out of her eyes, his smile warming the air around them.

They returned to comfortable silence quickly. Gamagoori busied himself with Mako's hair, combing through it, as Mako rested against his chest, going in and out of sleep while whispering the random things coming to her thoughts and lips. Gamagoori would chuckle, sigh, or hide his laughter after each of her silly sayings, Mako's smile tugging constantly at each one. Their peaceful bubble stretched on for a long time until Mako eventually shrugged her way off the bed, Gamagoori following behind her.

She entwined her fingers with his before he could dismount, and climbed into his lap, resting her heavy head on her shoulders. His arms impulsively wrapped around her, keeping her in place.

"Someone's needy" Gamagoori whispered, earning himself playing attacks from Mako. He caught her fists with his free hand and settled her back into his lap, kissing the side of her face to consolidate his work, "I'm just teasing, no need to hit."

Mako made a pouty face before relaxing back into her previous state, closing her eyes and nearly falling asleep within his arms again. She sighed in defeat, knowing that she had to eventually

leave the room, and stood up from the comfort of her boyfriend's embrace. Gamagoori gave her a smile and a chaste kiss as he stood up and opened the door for her, following her as they walked into the living room only to find Mako's family, including Ryuuko, waiting for them.

"There you are!" Mataro cried, pointing at Gamagoori, "It's time for our judgement on you dating my sister!"

Gamagoori kept a calm expression despite the fact that he was consciously freaking out about what they would think of him and their relationship. They family separated them quickly, ensuring no distractions as the family gave their verdict on him. Mako squirmed against Ryuuko, holding her arm like a lifesaver, but did not object to the separation. Ryuuko gave a quick look to him that gave some reassurance back, but Gamagoori was still worried of a bad verdict. He kept his eyes trained then on her parents, who were whispering to one another once more before turning to him, bringing on serious expressions, Mataro following suit alongside Guts.

"Ira Gamagoori, you came to our home in the hopes of gaining our approval to date Mako," Sukuyo started, standing up tall, "and you have abided to every test put forth to you, no questions asked. We have taken note of everything you did for this family and for Mako and have come to the decision we already had when you walked up to us earlier this afternoon."

Gamagoori saw smiles come across their lips, and a small part of him jumped in joy as the answer he hoped to have came to him.

"You have our blessing, Ira. Don't make us come after you if you hurt her." Barazo added, giving him a dark glare before returning back to his normal self. Gamagoori lifted a fist against his chest.

"I couldn't hurt her, Mr. Mankanshoku. I promise you now no harm is to come to her, no matter what. If I fail, you may do as you wish."

He had done it, somehow he had pulled out this impossible task of getting her family's approval. He sighed in relief as the family's hyper natures returned, Mako quickly jumping from her spot next to Ryuuko back into his arms, where she copiously congratulated him and reminded him that he could always do it. All the while, Ryuuko could only keep in laughter, which was caught by Mataro, and everyone turned their attention to her.

"Am I the only one who thought that this looked like you were giving him approval to marry her, or is it just me?"

Gamagoori's face went up in flames, smoke trailing from his ears as his brain overheated at the thoughts raging through him at Ryuuko's suggestion. Mako slammed into her, bright red blush stretching to her ears and desperately fighting the statement and her reaction to it. The entire house was up in laughter as they watched Mako, Gamagoori and Ryuuko duke it out over the fact that Ryuuko brought that thought, which everyone was thinking, up into the house. By the time Gamagoori had settled, Mako had given in with the biggest blush and confession that entered the house.

"I honestly wouldn't mind doing that you know, Ryuuko."

Silence. Dead, stagnant silence.

The house wouldn't find a moment in silence afterword until Gamagoori and Mako departed for a last-minute date before they had to go their separate ways for the day.

Mako settled against Gamagoori's side as they sat peacefully up on the hills facing the sea, ships and shipping boats moving along the horizon of the falling sun. They did not know why they came here per say, but it was quiet, isolated, and had a beautiful view to offer. They had picked up snacks on their way here, but they abandoned them for the prospect of simply enjoying the quiet stretched out around them, and the warmth that came from cuddling up like the cute couple they were becoming.

Mako let her eyes flutter close as a gentle ocean breeze washed over them, the smell of the saltwater bringing a smile to her face. Gamagoori shifted slightly, moving her gently but did not disrupt her perfect position or concentration. The blissful moment continued one without another slip.

Mako felt something simmer in her chest. It warmed her from the heart and through her blood, her toes curling into the grass below her. What was this feeling she had? It was different from what she always felt with Ryuuko and Gamagoori (even though the emotions she felt for each of them was different). She moved her left hand up to her chest, her eyes opening to the dim light around her. '*Was this what Gamagoori felt?*', Mako mused, looking over her shoulder at Gamagoori who was staring off into the sunset. He took notice of her staring and smiled warmly, his arm around her tightening in a hug. She looked down at her chest.

It has to be... I know it is. The words he confessed... it's my turn now!

Mako moved her right hand back on top of his free hand, that warmth she felt spreading faster through her. Confidence and power swelled in her. Another thought came to her head before she opened her mouth to speak, an interesting plan to truly confess like she should. She sighed and leaned heavy on Gamagoori, letting her eyes close in the bliss of the moment they shared.

"Ira?" She knew that she had his attention. He leaned over her shoulder to make eye contact.

"Hm?"

Mako tightened her hold on Gamagoori's hands. It would be as easy as breathing, as breezy as the wind around them, but she knew she needed just a bit more time before she could say the three magical words. It still stayed in her throat, burning with the passion she could put into them. Stall, her thoughts told her.

"What would you think if we did tie the knot in the future? You think we could have this HUGE wedding with tons of Edelweiss and forget-me-nots and honeysuckle! They all have a really cute meaning to them; I learned about them in that one weird sounding flower class where I made flower crowns. Do you think we could when the Life Fibers are gone?"

She felt his heart fire all pistons and beat like it was dying. Shivers ran through his body, making his breath hitch into a hiss. She looked up at him with a gentle expression, and found him smiling before his arms wove tighter around her waist.

"I... I do not know. We can't predict what is to happen once we defeat them, but if it works in our favor at the end, and you don't get tired of me, I... I would love to."

Mako let the gasp rising from her throat fly, her cheeks burning. She could imagine the spectacular mess the wedding could be, so many fun and intimate moments they could share through it all. She liked that future. She could live with him and go on dates with Ryuuko and maybe even raise a family later. She could envision her and Gamagoori raising little copies of themselves, running around and yelling like their father and drooling over food like their mother.

She wanted this future to happen. A smile returned to Mako's face and she dug herself closer to him.

"I can't wait then for the future!"

Gamagoori hummed his agreement left a lingering kiss on her shoulder and cheek, getting a giggle out of the girl. They went back into their peaceful silent fairytale moment as the sun started to slowly set below the blue horizon. The moment was perfect, and Mako couldn't think of any other time to confess it. The chains on her tongue snapped, freeing the words to her lips. She turned to finally say the three words when an annoying buzz broke the tender moment, sending their gazes behind them. The buzz died away for a moment, returning their romantic once, but it lasted only a second

when the buzz returned in a higher pitch, and Gamagoori was racing to protect Mako as a missile-like projectile came shooting toward them, exploding behind them in a shower of red thread.

"W-what was that?!" Mako yelled, turning around underneath Gamagoori who had used his body as a shield. As she was released from his protection, she found the skyline of the slums looking like the sunset.

What is going on?!

"Gama... what's happening to the slums?" Mako asked breathlessly, tugging his sleeve and pointing to the fiery glow of the he caught notice, his heart plummeted, eyes widening in disbelief. He quickly had Mako stand as he rushed to his car, getting the engine rolling before she got in and started to panic.

"What is happening over in the slums?!" Mako demanded. Gamagoori looked over his shoulder to back up and answered in a low voice.

"They're burning, Mako. The slums are burning down. We're being attacked."

Mako immediately sat up and stared impossibly at the flames rising above the slums, the colors reflecting in her eyes. What could have attacked them that could have started a fire so wide?

The missile earlier... it exploded into fire and threads...

"We have to get to the Academy! It's the Life Fibers, right?" Mako asked, turning back around and clicking her seatbelt on. Gamagoori roared back until he could get back on the road and raced away from the cliff into the smoke-filled roads of the rim of the slums. The fire was widespread, spanning several blocks and growing stronger. Smoke choked most streets and even threatened the One-Star living areas. Gamagoori's car had no roof so Mako used her discarded jacket as a mask to keep the smoke out of her lungs while

Gamagoori used his handkerchief and tied it around his face. They moved quickly through the slums until the building in front of them collapsed and exploded from the pressure inside, sending bricks through their car, making them slid to a crash-like stop right before impact. Their transport dead, they bailed out and ran from the fast-approaching fire, Gamagoori cursing the fact that he left his Goku Uniform at home.

Just as they ran around of right turn, another one of the missiles whistled above them, but did not explode. It instead turned on a dime before colliding with an old textile building rising four stories above them, and looked down at them. Mako noticed then that it changed its shape and turned into something that made her blood run cold.

It became a thread version of Ryuuko. The copy fell in front of them and rushed them, going for Mako who was still stunned by the Life Fiber transformation. The arms of the Life Fiber faux being turning into sharpened points, spirals of thread woven into weapons to stab and shred. Gamagoori, who had beaten his surprise with anger, quickly pushed Mako back and away from the assaulting menace, grabbed the thing by its front and flung it back to where it was except it smashed into the building forty feet in the air. They ran from the scene before it could recover, Mako nursing a bruised wrist from the push. They had to hide from patrolling Life Fibers, dodge flying debris from the buildings around them, burning or otherwise, and even hurdle over mutilated bodies which pushed their stride even faster, fearing for their own as the fallen had before them. It got worse as they neared and entered One-Star territory.

The numbers of Life Fiber 'bodies' increased three-fold, and COVERS floated over into the condos, invading the upper parts of the city. Eventually they had to fight the more sentient attack forms, killing their energy links with anything sharp enough to cut it. With Mako wielding dual glass daggers from a broken storefront and Gamagoori using one glass dagger and his strength, they got as far as an outlet mall before they had to hide away from the Life Fibers. They took shelter within a darkened store outside of the mall, which

was currently filled with the screaming of trapped One-Stars and their families. The sound was akin to the screams of the damned, dark and unholy, betraying any masking to the pure horror in the victim's strangled voices.

"Make it stop" Mako begged as she put her hands over her ears to block out the background shrieks of pain. Her daggers had fallen to her sides, her face portraying her opinions and emotions on the situation. She wanted desperately to get out and go back to normalcy. After such a sweet peace, you would think she'd expect trouble again. It must have been the realization that she knew she couldn't go back to normalcy once the Life Fibers came, or maybe it was the fact that people were dying all around her, sounding like they got dragged into the pits of hell by their faces. Either way, Mako whimpered out for Ryuuko, for him, for anyone to make the sounds stop. She had lost her usual bright outlook in exchange for the fall into the palms of her growing anxiety to the situation they were forced to endure.

Gamagoori wordlessly pulled Mako into his arms, cupped her hands in his and drowned out the screams of the dead and the burning warbles of the Life Fibers with his voice, telling her all was going to be okay when they woke up and the world would be better. He gave his word that they would make it out alive, with everyone alright and Ryuuko would be there for her always. Mako gratefully found rest before Gamagoori heard every voice within the mall die, leaving the area with an even more sinister silence; a silence kin to a new burial ground.

Gamagoori tilted his head down as he leaned against the metal wall behind him, holding Mako close. He let his bitter tears fall as he faced silence with an uneasy tumble into unwelcome dreams brought on by searing memories of his past.

When they awoke to the gloom of a downpour, the silence continued on. Mako was unnerved on everything else but their mission. Even as they navigated the alleyways of the condos and work places of

the One-Stars, Mako's hand could not cease their shaking. She didn't like the silence, or the bodies that they passed. She didn't think of this bloody war in any situation involving the Life Fibers. It wasn't war they were in anymore.

"It's slaughter..."

"Mako?"

"Huh?" she didn't realize she had spoken her thoughts out loud and sighed, turning her head partly around to speak to him, "I was just thinking about something. This doesn't look like war, not the ones I've learned about. This looks more like slaughter."

..."Mako... please don't think that way."

"And why not?! Is it because I'm a weak little No Star girl?"

"Not at all! It's not in your character to be so glum and scared! You're the optimistic one, seeing the brightness in the worst situations, always smiling!"

Mako started, pausing their trek through a crowded building block void of the living. "This thing happened, that's why I'm thinking like that! We've fought but there wasn't death, there wasn't casualties. Look at all the dead bodies, do you hear anything anymore? Everyone's dying around us... a-and we can't do anything to help them. No amount of destroying the COVER things will change the fact that we're being slaughtered! That is why my personality changed, because it's too dark to lighten up and-"

Mako sobbed into Gamagoori's chest as he embraced her, unable to cope with the fact that Mako was seriously affected by the death and war around her. She'd seen battle, but the bodies and screams accompanying most wars never came to her until now. It hurt to think of the countless losses the town was compiling. She didn't like looking at the bodies, she was horrified that she didn't know where

her family is or if they got out in time. She didn't know where anyone was; The Elite, the Two-Stars, Ryuuko, everyone.

"I want to know where the people I love are! I need to know that Mom, Dad, Mataro, and Ryuuko are alright!"

Gamagoori had no answer for her. He didn't know either and it felt wrong giving her false hopes. He simply kept her close as she sobbed, knowing no other way to comfort here in a time like this, in a situation such as this.

The buzzing returned and two Life Fiber projectiles shot their way toward them, two human like forms exploding out of their thread shells. They were mid-level forms with mutated forms, but nonetheless deadly and more quick about it. They launched from their landing spots and lashed out at them. Mako roared at them with a sudden rage, pushing Gamagoori away from her and jumping back, effectively dodging the flying COVER. The other aimed for Mako, giving a screech before launching a strike at her. Mako had infernos in her eyes as she roll-dodged, only taking a minor cut into her arm. She brandished her weapons, shouted for Gamagoori to fight, and struck out against her opponent, looking entirely changed. From tears to teeth, Two Star Mako returned even more deadly and ready to attack. Gamagoori gave a deadly smile as he rose one fist in defense, his dagger in another. He bounded toward his COVER as it fought against the fallen stone pinning it. It slipped free and brandished its weapon, stabbing forward to impale him. Sliding around to his right, Gamagoori grabbed one of its arms and threw it forward, giving him an open area to attack but found no bare string to cut. He went for the kill and stabbed the glass weapon through it, cutting up through its shoulder and jumping back before its swinging arm could hit him.

The COVER did not even try to fix itself and went to strike him again, his aim sloppy and easy to see. Gamagoori easily dodged and drove the knife into the thing's neck, throwing his momentum into the backward swing to rip out the back of its neck. The thread tying the COVER to the energy source dangled free, a brighter red in the field

of drying blood threads. He went for it, throwing his hand at it to violently rip it out of it, but found his hand bound by basting thread, tied by the enemy and frozen in place for a perfect attack. He was flying into the building behind them before he could fight the COVER's imposing fist as it pummeled into his face. The back of his head smacked into the hard stone, his vision going black for a few moments before flickering between on and off. His head felt cracked open like an egg, his limbs growing head at his sides. The dagger fell out of his grip, and the COVER drew closer, a fake smirk on the thread person's lips. He could only hear static and buzzing in his ears yet he saw Mako yelling for him as she downed her opponent in a departing snap attack on its energy thread and headed for his who still stalked its way toward him. The COVER rose its arms dramatically, letting him watch as the arms turned to barbed spirals. It did not hesitate as it brought down the things, and made an attempt on his life just before Gamagoori's vision failed him and everything went dead silent.

When his senses worked again, he was being guarded by a cut-up, panting Mako, glass daggers in hand and a headless COVER human. She rose her hands in attack and watched the thing back up, preparing an attack. She dodged to the side as she ran at it, doing a no-handed cartwheel over one of its arms before driving the daggers home into its neck, ripping out the entire energy string and ending the battle. As the COVER fell to the ground back in its original shape of a suit, Gamagoori finally felt the blinding pain running through his skull, neck and back, sending painfully alive adrenaline through his veins. He gasped out in pain as his body and mind worked in sync, realizing how much damage was done. He had his vision back but it was blurry around a few things. His hearing was gone in his left ear, and he couldn't move three fingers on his right hand. Mako stayed stagnant hovering over the dead COVERS, eyes cold as dry ice. She seemed to barely register that he was gasping out in pain. Her head piped up and turned to her right, hearing something rustle behind a building farther away.

When he weakly called her name, she snapped from her vicious mentality and rushed over to him with tears already falling in globs. He could barely hear what she said but he heard enough to know that she was freaking out over the fact that he barely responded and that there was blood behind him.

Blood? Oh... that was the sticky feeling down his neck. His skull must be bleeding. Could he be near death?

He felt his head slowly lift off the wall and a soft fabric wrap around his wound several times before it tied just above his right eye. His vision swam but he saw that Mako had torn the bottom of one of her pant legs and used it to soak up and help block the wound on his head. He smiled weakly before Mako softly rested her forehead on his, sighing in relief that he was responding to her in some way. He couldn't raise his right arm but slowly brought his scratched up left arm up around her shoulders.

"Gamagoori, can you hear me?" it sounded far away, not as strong but he could hear her. He gave a short nod.

"Y-yeah, but I can't hear anything in m... my left ear." Mako face slumped as she ran her hand over his deaf ear. He figured it was of the hit to the head; the damage had to be done to his nerves all through his body, really anything connected to the brain. He was getting dizzy and tired suddenly, and went to close his eyes but tapping against his bruised temple roused him awake.

"No, no sleep! I don't know if you're concussed or not but its bad to sleep with a head injury. Keep your eyes open!"

He nodded weakly and slowly rested back against the wall. He couldn't feel his legs yet and that scared him more than the rest of his injuries. Could he be paralyzed permanently from the waist down? He focused on his feet underneath his boots and felt three toes on each foot wiggle. He wasn't paralyzed permanently at least. He looked back at Mako who was a few feet away, approaching the

corner she had turned to earlier in response to a sound. She found nothing and quickly returned to Gamagoori's side.

Mako brushed her lips against his left cheek. "Can you move anything, can you stand?"

Gamagoori shook his head enough to get his answer across. "I can barely move anything from the waist down... I can move a... a few toes but nothing e-else."

Mako looked down to his feet and then back to his face. "I couldn't move you if I put everything into it. What's going to happen now?"

Gamagoori growled, pushing himself off the wall with his left arm, forcing his body to take the pain and work against the wounds. Mako did not argue against it, and watched as Gamagoori strained every muscle to the breaking point to at least stand up. After long moments of fighting his paralyzed limbs, he found the power to stand up, propped by the wall. He looked like hell, sweat soaking his face and neck and he became red in the face from overexertion, but he was standing.

It didn't last long however as his legs collapsed underneath him, sending him back to the ground hard. He groaned as his tailbone bruised under the sudden shock of the fall, Mako jumping in fright as he fell back to the bottom. His vision went in and out again, his head swimming in a sea of fog and water. Mako's words went silent to him. However he followed her sight as she turned to a floating figure above them. Fire lit them up in hues of pink before the person disengaged and landed with a quick roll. He couldn't recognize her but Mako obviously did. Through the din of his soundless moment, he heard a familiar name.

"Ryuuko, I... help... hurt... please!"

His vision went black, and Gamagoori fell into the arms of rest without so much as a glance back.

The Last Intermission

"Gamagoori? Ira!? IRA WAKE UP!"

Mako didn't know how to help him now. Moving him was impossible even with Ryuuko here and if they tried they could hurt him even more. She had no plan to help.

"Mako... what's happened?"

Mako moved from her boyfriend's side and picked up her daggers again. She sat down again near the wall Gamagoori leaned on or support, and ran the blades together, slowly working out the jagged edges.

"W-we were on our date on the cliff-side when the Life Fibers started attacking and burning the slums. We figured that we should get to the Academy so we could defend ourselves, but the car got killed when a building exploded in front of us and send bricks into it. We've haven't stopped running and fighting since that happened, and we had to camp out in a One-Star mall area for a night to survive. It was horrible, Ryuuko; the Life Fibers were brutally murdering everyone inside. We've were fighting with these pieces of glass after a human shaped one that looked like you ambushed us in the slums early on. Then we got here and we got ambushed by those COVERS over there, and Gamagoori got surprise attacked by his enemy and it threw him head first into the building. You could hear the crack sound when his head hit the wall. Now he could be paralyzed forever and we're stuck here and he's out like a light."

Ryuuko immediately moved to comfort her best friend, who took the hug in stride and pressed herself close to her before she sniffled and surrendered a few tears. Her cries were silent, but they spoke volumes to Ryuuko. She should have been there earlier to prevent Gamagoori's injuries. She should have been there to protect them, to keep them safe and together. Mako's fingers dug into the back vent

of Senketsu, trying to keep some tight hold on her best friend as she cried out her worries for Gamagoori.

"Ryuuko, do you have any clue how to get him to safety without hurting him more?" Mako asked softly after the calming embrace ended, and she sat down gently on a concrete barrier close to Gamagoori.

Ryuuko immediately tapped on the earpiece still active in her ear, listening in to it briefly before sending the call, connecting to a network still in use.

"Kiryuuin, you there? I found them... no, things aren't good here, and they're not in good shape"

"Gamagoori's unconscious!" Mako shouted. She could hear Satsuki's response loud and clear through the tiny speaker..

"WHAT?! Matoi, hand me over to her now."

Ryuuko gave the earpiece without question to Mako. She fiddled with it until it fit correctly and answered back.

"Lady Satsuki?"

"What happened to him?" The words were solid and fierce, edged in barbed wire. Satsuki sounded worried and dead serious set on finding out.

"He got thrown into a building by a human-shaped COVER. His head hit first, and before he blacked out he couldn't move anything below the waist besides a few toes, couldn't move three fingers on his right hand and lost all hearing in his left ear. He hit his head hard enough to make it bleed and had a bad stutter. I'm scared that he won't wake up, we need to get him somewhere safe before more Life Fibers get to us!"

"... Can you do something for me quickly Mankanshoku?" Satsuki asked, her voice softer than usual. Mako nodded, then realized that Satsuki couldn't see it, giving a quick noise of confirmation.

"The earpiece can be used to scan things as well. I need to figure out the extent of Gamagoori's injuries before we can do anything. Scan him, find something to hide in, and don't move him at all costs."

"Okay." Mako quickly took the earpiece and held it in front of her, tapping the device until it emitted a red beam of light and shone it over Gamagoori. The light beam fractured into thirty different streams of red light, scanning over and into him to fully map his body and insides. When the scan was complete, Mako went to talk to Satsuki again but arrived to silence on the other end. Ryuuko took the device back and quickly surveyed the area, quietly talking with Senketsu as they scanned for weak points, any sign of the Life Fibers, and materials they could use to keep them warm, dry, and hidden. Mako joined the search and found a rolled up tarp inside one of the houses nearby.

With the tarp and the metal poles from the balconies above them, they had something to block them from the sight of the Life Fibers. Ryuuko kept point on the rooftop as Mako worked to dig the poles into the ground, setting up their makeshift base until help could arrive. She pushed her sore and damaged muscles until they nearly broke, but completed the shelter. Tarp secured overhead by zip ties and nails, eight feet in the air suspended up five metal poles and extra tarp along the sides and front to maximize protection from any elements if they came. Ryuuko slid inside with blankets she stole from a ransacked storefront a mile back, and carefully covered Gamagoori with the largest. Making sure that the blanket covered him properly, Ryuuko adjusted as she rounded him, carefully lifting his head off the brick building. The strip of denim around his head was helping the blood clot, but it was getting full. Mako sacrificed another strip of her jeans and wrapped it again around the same area, tying it tight above his right eye.

"So we have to wait until Lady Satsuki and the others can get here?" Mako asked settling on top of an unbroken box they dragged in along with a few others things left undamaged from the Life Fiber assault. Ryuuko weakly nodded, brushing dust from Senketsu's eyes. She had transformed back to her sailor uniform for the time being, relaxing against the building some feet away from Gamagoori.

"Unfortunately, Mako. We need their help to get him safely out of here. You need some help as well. How are the cuts doing?"

Mako looked down at the scattered cuts and bruises lining her arms, then down to the cut on her left leg and the burn marks. "I'm sore and bruised up, so my skin is really touchy and my muscles are tired. All I want to do is find something to eat and sleep..."

"And why not sleep? I can keep watch."

Mako's face turned dark and serious; her Two-Star behavior showing itself again. "I let him get hurt. He's protected me once, it's my turn," right then her cheery disposition returned, "Besides, you've probably been fighting and flying around a long time! You need your sleep to be at your best. I'll keep watch for ya!"

Ryuuko sighed, giving in to her need to sleep. "Alright, I'll catch some shut-eye. If anything happens, wake me or Senketsu up immediately. You've fought enough through this."

Ryuuko jumped off from the wall and grabbed a blanket from the pile she had. She moved a lone wooden pallet toward one of the piles of boxes, curled up with her blanket, and attempted to sleep, leaving Mako to the duty of guarding for the night.

She settled into a good place on her box, keeping her ears open for the droning of Life Fibers and anything that could endanger them. For the first four minutes of sunset, Mako kept to the job with ease, watching the tarps to see if shadows passed by. Nothing was happening. It was silent, simply a twilight period between attacks. Mako eventually found herself in front of Gamagoori, her hands

brushing back his unkempt hair. Gamagoori still did not respond or react, and lie still as he did earlier. He looked in terrible shape, and a cut in his forehead was slowly opening again, blood trickling down his face in a small line. Mako took her sleeve and rubbed the blood away, pressing it to the cut to block it up. She turned her wrist away from his face and surveyed it. Although his expression was neutral, it had a hint of peacefulness within his lips. Bruises were rising on his cheekbones.

She rested her forehead against his, closing her eyes with a mournful sigh. All she could do now was hope that he was going to wake up again. She stood up slowly and returned to her post on top of her crate, back to the calming repetition of sharpening her glass blades against each other. She glanced back at Ryuuko and found her fast asleep, Senketsu's eyes shut in his stasis sleep. She turned back to the flapping opening in their shelter, seeing shadows play with the shapes of the area like children. No harm around, not even the cry of animals. She adjusted her legs so that they were propped up to relax her muscles, and continued the task of sharpening her weapons until she deemed them ready for another battle.

She had nothing to do, and she was feeling adrenaline build in her limbs, so she ventured outside of the shelter, letting the twilight sleepers continue their journeys. Not much had changed, actually nothing at all. Buildings were crumbling bit by bit and parts of dead Life Fibers hung like banners on the edges of buildings. The end of the sunset bathed the area in a hue of dark purple, creating a gloomy, creepy atmosphere around the area. Not a single living thing stirred in the twilight of the Life Fiber attack. Mako moved out toward the town a few alleys down, but stopped before she lost sight of the shelter. I need to find something to eat for all of us, Mako thought as her stomach took its cue and rumbled in hunger. She swallowed the nervous lump in her throat, put on her serious business face, and walked on out of the sight of the tent. She walked calmly even though her heart shrieked for leaving her best friend and unconscious boyfriend behind with no guard, but they needed something to eat and fast. She found town easy but immediately

ducked down into cover behind a fallen pillar. Something was moving in the shadow of a store on her 11. She drew her blades.

"God dammit, where the hell could they be? It's not like they're hiding in there, the empty pigsty." the person mumbled, stumbling out of the wreckage of the building. Mako knew that high-pitch snark anywhere. She set a dagger down and picked up a fair size rock and threw it into some glass ten feet from her, making noise.

The crack of a gunshot hit the pillar and marble flew over her head. Mako reacted as she had learned and was at Nonon's neck right as she put her gun to the side of Mako's head. Both recoiled as soon as they realized what they almost did, and recovered from their shock of attack.

"Thank god I found you, slacker." Nonon exclaimed, holstering her weapon. Mako let a smile slide to her lips.

"I found you. I was behind the pillar for a bit. Wait, why are you here anyway?!"

Nonon took her turn to smirk. "To find you, the dragon and the toad. We have to scout before we can head in because... well let's just say the damage to Gamagoori is worse than you think."

Nonon immediately cursed herself for telling Mako that piece of information. Mako's face went snow-white, her hands shaking for a moment before she took control again, color returning to her face. She took in a large gulp of air and blew it out, calming down enough to speak.

"How bad?" Mako wasn't ready for nonsense, her Two-Star attitude appearing. Nonon registered surprised on her face for a moment for how quickly Mako's demeanor changed, but recovered just as quickly.

"Well, he's partially paralyzed from the waist down, but we aren't sure if it's permanent or temporary. I'll tell you the rest if you show

me where they are."

Mako nodded and turned to the side waving Nonon toward the way of their shelter. Before Mako could open her mouth to ask, she handed Mako some jumbo sized Hi-Chews and let her dig in to a strawberry one before continuing her explanation of Gamagoori's injuries.

"The hit to the head caused some bleeding into his brain, so he's damned lucky he could do anything, much less be awake. Three fingers on his right and one on his left were found to be paralyzed temporarily, and the amount of damage to his insides is enough to scramble my stomach. Punctured lung thanks to the hit from the COVER, badly bruised or splintered ribs, dislocated right shoulder and his heart's beating abnormally. You haven't tried to move him have you?"

"Uh-uh" Mako replied mid-chew of her food. She swallowed quickly to get a clearer answer. "No. The only thing we did was set up some cover and cover him with a blanket to keep him warm. We've waited there since."

Nonon gave a passing glance toward the COVERS lying around the last alley before they entered the open area that they found home, the tarp shelter undisturbed. Mako parted the opening and walked in, Nonon quickly followed and made a beeline to Gamagoori. She checked the back of his head, jostled the temporary field bandage around his head, and made sure he was still with them. She sighed in relief once she got the answers she needed and faced Mako and Ryuuko.

"So, he's that bad?" Ryuuko asked, just finished getting filled in on his situation by Mako. Nonon nodded, giving a grunt beside it.

"Unfortunately. It means we can't simply come over here and pick him up. We'll need to get a medical transport in here to get him safely to base, and even then the threat to his life is great. The roads

and sky are clear right now but the Life Fibers will be back. We just don't know when, and this is our only shot of getting you guys out."

Mako stepped up with a huff of anger. "Then let's get this show going! I want to get out of here without fighting more of those things."

Nonon nodded in agreement, and tapped her communicator, connecting to Satsuki and the base with ease. She walked outside to make the call private, and left them alone in the tent. Ryuuko snagged a green apple Hi Chew from Mako and chowed down with her on top of a crate, biting quickly into the snack without a thought. Not a minute later, Nonon walked in with a scowl and sat on the crate below them.

"They're coming, but we have to wait. May take an hour if they don't catch their attention. Can I have one, I haven't had one since leaving the base." Mako kindly handed Nonon and grape Hi-Chew with a smile, biting into another strawberry one before stashing the pile of snacks away for later. Night quickly fell and before long an hour had passed with no activity or movement. The rumble of trucks woke Mako who had fallen asleep in Ryuuko's lap and had Nonon standing from her nap. Parting the tarp side, they found two trucks pulling up the alleyways connected to the area, Satsuki and a few medical personnel falling behind her as they approached them.

"In here, in here!" Mako called out, waving them inside, "Be careful with him."

"I'll assume he's still unconscious?" Satsuki asked. Ryuuko nodded quickly, stepping up to her without warning.

"Still out like a light. How are things at base?"

"Not good. We have to move quick, we're getting reports of movement from the bay. Mankanshoku, you're not in good shape either. I would join him in the truck."

Mako shook her head, her bruises yelling at her to stop moving quickly. "No. I owe Gamagoori. He protected me and now I protect him. That includes taking his mantle until he's fit to do so. I swear on my bond with him that I will uphold his job with great resolve, ma'am!"

Everyone looked at Mako in amazement as she saluted Satsuki as Gamagoori did, a fiery passion burning in her eyes. Her words were true and powerful, her vow serious and unwavering. She would stand in his stead until he could come and reclaim it from her. No matter what state she was in, she was going to do his job and defend Lady Satsuki without fail. Ryuuko sighed and patted Mako on the back, applauding her standing for Gamagoori. Nonon sighed and simply walked toward the trucks to help open the doors for Gamagoori, who was being slowly carried out of the shelter. Satsuki gave a lopsided smile to Mako.

"Then prove yourself worthy of the position as my shield, Mako Mankanshoku. If you can fight still, then fight. We expect some resistance on the way back, so you will be on the mounted turret of the medical truck. Shoot anything that comes our way."

"Yes, ma'am!" Mako smiled wide before running up to the medical truck and climbing up the ladder to the top, grabbing the handles to the turret like an old friend. Much like the turret from the One-Star bus, it sported a seat but Mako chose to stand, checking the turret's 360 turn and making sure she could aim correctly when accuracy could be used. Ryuuko and Satsuki piled into the other truck and they were off with the slam of the medical truck's doors. Mako kept stable on top of the truck, aiming around behind the truck to check for an ambush. Nothing appeared on the horizon yet, but Mako was anxious to fight what was to come. Satsuki's truck pulled ahead of them, leading the convoy up on to the long highway wrapping around the town and city. All was silent as they rolled up the road gradually, an occasional bump breaking the growing graveyard's silence below them sprawling like a necropolis. Mako was left without guidance because no one gave her an earpiece so she relied on her sight and

hearing. As she turned back to the front of the truck, she heard the telltale signs of the Life Fibers. When she saw the flash of red threads, she opened fire on them, slicing them into pieces and rendering them harmless.

"Fire at will, I repeat fire at will!" came the order from Satsuki. Those with guns came blazing out, and Mako aimed.

Mako gladly opened fire and took her role as protector of Lady Satsuki, Ryuuko Matoi, Ira Gamagoori, and all the others as high as she could and revved up the chain gun to its highest setting, bullets raining down the sides as she executed the Life Fibers in her way, a manic grin stuck to her face even after they arrived a bit scuffed, but in one piece. Once Mako was on the ground, her smile slid away and her mind shut down, her body hitting its max and shutting down to recover. She heard Ryuuko exclaim some obscenities before she caught the falling Mako.

"Take her with Gamagoori, Ryuuko. We'll need her back to 100 percent as well." Satsuki asked. Ryuuko nodded, adjusted Mako's limp body in her arms, and walked in behind the gurney carrying Gamagoori. As Ryuuko and the injured went inside, Satsuki found herself watching the Life Fibers as they descended down into the town for a second assault. She then looked toward the Academy in the distance, anger boiling dangerously in her stomach. Her fortress taken from her, her town being murdered and slaughtered, her people gone.

She swore she saw the horrifying glint of rainbow from the Academy before she stalked back inside, wanted nothing more but to fight back, but was left with no choice but to hide and regroup.

Iori and Inumuta were mulling over the large caches of data streaming in from sources all over the town and surrounding area, picking out that which seemed important and sorting it into its appropriate folder or section. They paused in general sorting and

went to searching through the files and data from Mako's and Gamagoori's initial and through medical examinations and tests.

"I'm surprised they survived so long there." Iori mentioned, looking through the files side by side.

"And I'm surprised that Mako stayed awake and alert this whole time." Inumuta noted, focusing in on Mako's data as it sorted it into five different folders. The doors behind them slid open and both boys turned to stand and salute the entering Satsuki before returning to the data sorting and collection.

"Inumuta, Iori, what's been found?"

Iori and Inumuta pulled up the data gathered from Mako and Gamagoori's injuries respectively, separating the data and splitting each persons' data into the two large screens in front of them. It displayed current vital signs and a full-scale model of their bodies, parts of them marked or colored in red, orange, yellow, or black. Satsuki looked at it curiously.

"From what we can tell, Mako is just lucky to be able to move anything at all at this point. How she used her arms and legs is a miracle. The constant fighting and taking attacks has her bones almost in pieces. The bones in her arms and legs had chips and cracks up and down them. How she continued on shows how much she's grown in both power and willpower. She has some minor internal bleeding with is already taken care of, so we don't have to worry about that," Iori told Satsuki, "We fixed the issues and damage to her bones as well, so those should recover fairly quickly thanks to the resources here. Outside of that, her body was on its last legs. She hadn't slept properly since the attack began three days ago, was severely dehydrated and barely had anything in her stomach. How her body held out until now is simple determination on her part, maybe some luck."

Satsuki surveyed the data in front of her, seeing finally what the full body scan was telling her. Mako's survival was miraculous and

rather impressive. She knew that beyond the main center, a few hallways down, Mako lay unconscious bound by bandages and under the spell of pain medication, being monitored by prototype medical equipment to ensure her recovering and comfort.

"Gamagoori, however... he's just lucky to still be breathing, much less alive." Inumuta said point-blank, moving Gamagoori's data board front and center.

"Multiple internal injuries, countless amounts of internal bleeding, broken bones, and nerve damage. The hit to his spine and head paralyzed him from the waist down, but it looks to be long-term temporary paralysis, but until it passes he may be unable to move or use them without help. There are others paralyzed places on his body but those will easily heal themselves without our intervention. We were able to repair the damage to his hearing, but we won't know if it works until he wakes up, if he ever does."

Satsuki's hair on the back of her neck rose in fear. "What do you mean?"

Iori opened another file of data on Gamagoori's injuries. "We already know that he has some minor brain hemorrhaging, punctured lung, damage to the ribs, abnormal heart beat, but with the brain injuries, he could never wake up. He could be stuck in this coma for a long time if he doesn't heal. We'll have to wait until his body heals itself; we've done what we could for him."

Satsuki stayed silent, staring at the data streaming across the screen before them. Gamagoori clinically brain-dead. Stuck in a coma while the world ended around him. She wouldn't let it happen. Mako wouldn't let it happen. No one would let Ira Gamagoori fade into the background by a single injury.

"Remind me how bad the bleeding was."

Iori stepped up again. "It wasn't much, but bleeding within the skull is supremely dangerous. It shouldn't be enough to have lasting

damage but it's enough to keep him down for good. We were able to get it all out and seal the wound but we don't know how much of an impact it had. Screening and x-rays didn't show anything abnormal but we can't be sure."

Satsuki sighed, setting her hands against the consoles before her. "So it's a game of hurry up and wait for him to recover?"

Iori and Inumuta confirmed her statement with quick confirming noises, leaving Satsuki with a hard decision ahead, but one she anticipated. The conversation dropped and they went back to business in cataloging incoming data from the field agents they had out and from their collected data from retrieving Mako and Gamagoori.

"Any signs of Mako's family?"

Inumuta didn't look up from his screen as he answered. "Not yet, but we haven't gotten notices on their deaths. They could be in an ill-monitored part the One-Star condos that were not targeted or they're as sneaky and quick as they have proved to be in the past."

"Mhm."

"Inumuta. Something's happening in the med bay." Iori announced, pushing away an alert that flashed on his screen. Satsuki took notice and walked out without notice, making her way to the infirmary to see what was happening. The doors hissed open for her, doctors clad in Nudist Beach gear and lab coats passed her and bowed. She followed the commotion sounding from the intense care unit and found Mako panicking from her bed, unsure of what was happening, suddenly surrounded by men and women barely clad in anything asking her to stay still. Satsuki alerted a staff member to retrieve Ryuuko to help comfort Mako.

"Mankanshoku, it's okay, you're safe." Satsuki told her as she approached, the staff parting a gap for their commanding officer. Mako slowly calmed down, her labored breathing shaking her frame

as it shivered in the grasps of the facility workers. Satsuki waved them off, Mako free of their grips. The brunette sighed and went to grab Satsuki's arm, but she quickly remembered whose arm she was going for and back pedaled her plans, simply leaning back in her medical bed instead.

"Why is everyone nearly naked?" Mako asked, curious about why she was tended to by near naked people who didn't seem to care about the nakedness. She also wondered why she was back into her school uniform, "And why am I wearing my uniform?"

"I'll explain later. Can you walk alright?"

"Oh that too! How did I end up here? Did I faint or something?"

Satsuki gave a weak one-second smile. "Yes. After we arrived here, your body and mind leaped beyond their limits, and shut down to help and fix itself. Mako, your bones were found fractured and cracked nearly everywhere. You were badly dehydrated and exhausted to the point of death."

Mako looked honestly surprised, eyes widening and mouth dropping open. "Really, I was?! I didn't know I was so banged up, I couldn't really feel any of it."

"You were most likely fueled by adrenaline and a few other things. Mankanshoku, if you're able to, we need our Disciplinary Chair."

Mako blinked for a moment before a smile broke out on her face, pride gleaming in her eyes. She hopped off the bed and stretched her limbs momentarily, testing her movement range and abilities for another moment before following Satsuki at a respectable distance, arms folded behind her. Personnel that passed them remarked about Mako's sudden change into a near carbon copy of Gamagoori's stern stature. They entered a command post and found the rest of the Elite Four already gathered there. Ryuuko, Mikisugi, and Tsumugu were there as well, but the older men stood off at the consoles connected

to the monitors showing battle data and files on the Life Fibers attacking the town.

The Elite bowed as Satsuki called for start and activated the holographic tabletop between the group gathered, a map of the town and academy rising up from it. At the tip-top was a single glowing dot of rainbow light.

"From what we can tell, the Life Fibers are systematically attacking the town on a schedule. They started by burning the lower areas of the slums, smoking out the higher part and then bringing the smoke over the One-Star facilities, covering the area in enough smoke for cover. The Life Fibers continued their assault through the slums but did not hit everything, instead heading for the One-Stars to deplete our army down quickly. It's obvious the tactic worked as much of the One-Star territory is now in their possession or empty of students. Mako and Gamagoori can back up the data from what they witnessed while escaping." Inumuta explained. Mako nodded when her name came up in his explanation, knowing that her memories of the One-Star slaughter would back up what had happened.

"So what are we going to do? And what the hell is with the rainbow burning at the Academy?" Ryuuko asked, pointing the bright rainbow star at the top. Satsuki spoke up.

"You've proven yourself ready for this. The rainbow at the top is to mark where my mother is; the one person who controls and watches over the Life Fibers. Mikisugi should have told you about Ragyo before this."

"Why is Ragyo here anyway, Lady Satsuki?" Mikisugi asked, wandering from the consoles, "Our specs had her pegged for attack way later. What changed?"

"I don't know." A collective gasp echoed in the room as her Elite questioned their leader uncertainty, "Our plans couldn't have gotten out, they're sealed tight. No one could have known. My mother must

have found out somehow that my intentions were to end her plans for Life Fiber domination and assaulted us earlier."

"Whoa, whoa, whoa, back up a moment. Life Fiber domination? Ragyo leading the space threads? What the holy hell is going on, Kiryuuin?" Ryuuko exclaimed. Mako backed her up with a vigorous nodding.

"What was that plan you were talking about? Can we hear it since we're now all stuck in this place and with your mom in the Academy?" Mako asked. Nonon and Sanageyama went to snap at the coconut head but they were waved off by Satsuki. For the first time since entering the base days ago, she looked defeated for a moment before straightening her mood and addressing the questioning new allies to the cause.

"There is no point now to leave you out of the loop anymore, Mankanshoku, Matoi. So listen well because I will not be repeating what I am to tell you."

The meeting dissolved after Satsuki explained to their newest members of the team what she had been planning to complete. Ryuuko was still in the room talking to Lady Satsuki as Mako excused herself, walking calmly out at first before breaking into a light sprint, trying to retrace her steps back into the infirmary. After dealing with the fact that she missed Gamagoori's yelling are her, which he most likely would have done Lady Satsuki's presence in such a situation, she needed to see him. She needed to see that he survived. When she eventually got lost in the winding hallways of the base, those nice enough that walked past her lead her toward the infirmary and pointing out the intensive care unit, but something told Mako that she would not find him there.

"I need to see Gamagoori." she stated. The woman who led her there sharply inhaled but lead her on into the farther sections of the infirmary, revealing an entire area of shiny equipment and futuristic setting. It reminded Mako of the place she woke up in. Doctors

roamed around them, now fully clothed in proper attire, and soon stopped them from advancing but let Mako through. A few doctors pointed her toward the way of Gamagoori, and she calmly walked down the halls with kind doctor who knew exactly where he was, a modest woman who had great respect for Mako's relationship with Gamagoori. She was apparently in charge of taking care of him when the machines watching over him got sent in for repairs and recharging. Mako couldn't help but grow anxious at what she was going to find when she saw Gamagoori.

"Relax, Ms. Mankanshoku, the doctor told her, smiling softly, "He is still asleep and recovering slowly. We've figured out that he can also hear us. Maybe you can tell him something to help him recover faster."

Mako brightened up just in time for her guide to stop and open the curtains of a concealed room. In the middle of the white room lay Gamagoori. Covered by a sheet and attached to several tubes including one that went into his chest, most likely to assist him with breathing. Machines hovered over him like flies, yet they simply scanned over him, monitoring him like faithful pets. Mako's breath stilled as she walked up carefully to him, the machines altering their tasks and looking at her curiously. They beeped once and swarmed up above her, giving them privacy.

"Gamagoori! You're okay-ish. At least you're not bleeding anymore, and you're pinker and breathing okay." Mako said, walking to his side and resting her hands on his arm. His pulse bounced under his skin as she checked it, smiling as she felt his heart pump strong. He survived the ride here, and he got treated with the best medical equipment and medicine by the best Satsuki and Nudist Beach could offer. Her tears came and she let them fall. They were tears worthy of the situation.

"I'm better for now. I won't want to get you worried but apparently a lot of my bones were hurt bad and my body nearly killed itself. I'm good now, even though walking hurts here and there. I ran against doctor's orders as well. Don't be mad at me when you wake up

about it though! I'm alright. I have to push some limits to heal well, right?"

She looked down at his face and briefly brushed his hair out of his face. He looked peaceful, and it made her happy. She leaned down close to him, hovering her lips over his like they used to tease each other. She could feel the smallest amount of air coming out of his mouth.

"Get better soon, Ira! Lady Satsuki, The Elite, even Ryuuko, can't wait to see you back on your feet. I'm also waiting for you to wake up."

Mako pressed her lips to his in a chaste kiss, simply reveling in the feel of them before lifting away and planting another on his forehead. She looked down at his peaceful face and hiccupped, brushing her tears away momentarily.

"I love you Ira. I hope you can hear me like the nice woman doctor says you can. I'm finally ready to say it, Ira. I love you."

The Fall Of Heroes

Satsuki began looking over the specs she had delivered from the data center from her enlarged PDA, scrolling through and reading every word and phrase carefully and thoroughly. The past four hours have put stress back into her mind, but it wasn't all unexpected. She's down one Elite, supported and allied with Mikisugi and the Nudist Beach by emergency circumstances and fast-forwards of their plans, and Mako's still uneasy with Gamagoori being down and out for the time being. Add the obvious burden of Life Fibers slaughtering her people and her mother usurping her throne in an unpredictable coup, and the situation started to get dimmer and dimmer by the hour.

The words began to blur and she set the PDA down beside her, rubbing her eyes with the balls of her hands. She hadn't slept in over twenty-four hours and it was beginning to drain her. It grew worse when Junketsu continued to struggle and fight her control like the beast it is. She had Junketsu pinned in its case currently to help her regain her energy and avoid any possible anemia, and had on a spare change of Life-Fiber free civilian clothing, unlike her pantsuit that she bared before the Kamui, that covered her enough for comfort and modesty.

A knock on her chamber doors broke her spell. She called out for the visitor, and the door slowly opened enough for a brunette head of hair to poke in with eyes cast down.

"Can I come in, Lady Satsuki?" Mako asked, keeping still in the doorway. Satsuki waved her inside and instructed her to close the door behind her to ensure privacy. Mako quickly closed the door and stood at attention before her, trying her best to keep still. Satsuki waited patiently for Mako to speak but found herself not in a conversation but a tight embrace, Mako's self-control shattering and her old, enjoyable personality showing itself.

"I finally said it." Mako whimpered, burying her face as far as she could into Satsuki's shoulder, "I told him what I failed to say before this war."

Satsuki understood what Mako meant, knowing the three words she told him in the infirmary. She made sure to watch the live feeds from the cameras nearest to Gamagoori. She was against contact like this and she shivered as dark memories triggered her fears, presenting a panic attack. Mako felt her reaction and backed away, apologizing in the form of a bow for her failure to remember of Satsuki's rule on touching and her anxiety. Satsuki took less than a minute to relax her panic and return to normal. She ushered Mako over again for the comfort the girl needed and with some reluctance Mako returned and wrapped her arms around Satsuki's midsection, burying herself back into her shoulder. Satsuki simply controlled the silent flare of fear that hit her and let Mako cry. Ryuuko mostly likely left with the scouting party earlier before Mako returned from the infirmary, explaining why Mako ended up at her doorstep looking for comfort.

"I need to stand tall for him and everyone but I just want to collapse and cry!" Mako admitted, wiping away a glob of snot running from her nose. Satsuki set Mako beside her on her bed and kept one hand on top of Mako's head as she sobbed hunched over. A minute passed in silence before Mako slowly sat up and angrily wiped her tears away by herself.

"I shouldn't be like this! Gamagoori would not stand for it, especially in front of Lady Satsuki!" Mako chided herself, "I will not stand for it either!"

Mako lifted her head with dramatic flare, passion and determination burning in her lit up brown eyes. Satsuki smiled proudly as Mako stood up and crossed her hands over her head, light illuminating her as she began her long-missed, overdue hallelujah rant.

"I am Mako Mankanshoku, best friend of Ryuuko Matoi, girlfriend to Ira Gamagoori and companion to Lady Satsuki Kiryuuin! I am the girl who stood in the face of battle and death and said 'I'm going to

survive no matter what!'. I fought with glass and nails, and survived being bullied and captured by countless clubs and mean people! I may be down for now, but he will stand up stronger than before! He would want me strong for him, for everyone, because I am strong! I have strength that could help so many!

"Mako has returned to her self, bigger and better! I will fight in my boyfriend's stead, and fight for the cause to kick out all the Life Fibers no matter what I must do!"

Mako continued to shine in her own light as Satsuki stood with her, an air of power and might forming around them. Mako nodded and they departed from the room side by side, ready to face the darkening world around them with all they could give and more.

"Life Fiber patrols. A waste of time, there are enough sweeping through here to do their job. What is she up to now?"

Satsuki relocated to the command center after seeing Mako off into the barracks and temporary Goku Uniform production line where she decided to work with Iori to get her outfitted with a new Goku Uniform. Satsuki knew that Iori eagerly waited for something to come up to stray him from seeing the depressive totals of death and missing people in town, along with the data streaming from agents that would never come home. Barely anyone got free of the town, but the numbers coming in from the base in Osaka looked promising. Nearly half of the town's population got free of the liberation by Life Fiber domination before they were either killed or used as batteries.

The rest they couldn't confirm. The list of the dead grew every minute, bit by bit. The list of MIA grew the same way. The amount of people that could be under Life Fiber control or slaughtered by them was unable to have a solid figure, and Satsuki knew it never would be. Countless innocent lives were lost. It sickened her that her mother would be this cruel to simply slaughter people with no malicious intent to her cause.

"Still staring into death?"

Satsuki turned around to find Ryuuko sauntering inside the room, scuff marks littering her bare arms. Senketsu looked up at Ryuuko momentarily, a few words passing between them, before they focused back on Satsuki.

"Indeed. It's all I find myself able to do."

"Really? Staring at numbers that scream your failure? That's your plan right now?"

Satsuki turned back to the wall monitors. "How did the scouting mission go?"

Ryuuko scoffed at Satsuki's avoidance of the obvious, but let it slide. She could understand what pressure and insecurity the queen of Honnōji Academy had on her shoulders. "Not good, but not bad."

"It's a step forward in the right direction. Did anyone besides you survive, or do we add four more to the list of the dead?"

Ryuuko went silent for a moment before speaking, her voice lower, solemn. "Add two. Kai Harejime, killed in battle by Life Fibers. Mei Dasuke, captured by battle-configured COVER. Killed when I took it out by mistake."

Satsuki looked sadly at Ryuuko, seeing pain flash in her eyes before they shrouded themselves to keep any more emotion locked down. Her lips moved to signal her silent conversation with her Kamui, and Satsuki added the two One-Star student-soldiers to the list of those fallen. She stared at their names as the computer filed them into the list of killed in action.

'Not soldiers... victims drafted into a dead-end slaughter' Satsuki bitterly reminded herself. They were students taken in with no other options but this or death. *'Some must fight and die for the rest to safely pass through Hell, but these losses are totaling up too quickly.'*

"The other two are in the infirmary for some minor injuries, if you wanted to know." Ryuuko added, "It wasn't all death and wounds thought. We found as well a way out."

Satsuki all but launched herself at Ryuuko, staring her in the eyes deep enough to creep her out, but the desperation in the queen's eyes told her the narrative behind her desperation. Ryuuko relaxed into Satsuki's grip, finally get her to relax and collect herself to rationally ask her one question.

"A way out of here? For all of us?"

Ryuuko nodded. "Nudist Beach outpost on the outskirts. Huge ship, big enough for everyone and supplies. It's a ways away, but if we move at the right time, we'll all make it."

A way out...

"Inumuta. Give me base-wide communication. I have good news for everyone."

"Here."

Satsuki held the mic to her lips and let herself breathe for a moment for turning it on. "Attention all refugees, personnel, and members of the surviving Honnōji Academy. Thanks to a recent scouting party effort, I was just informed that we now have a way out of the city to regroup, refresh, and plan for our retaking of our Academy."

Everyone within the command center could hear the base's cheering as the first good news since the beginning of the war began came to them. Ryuuko chuckled at their excitement. Satsuki continued on with her speech.

"When the assault ends this cycle, we will leave and head for the ship waiting for us. You have that time to pack anything you need, and prepare any portable equipment for shipping. It's time people. We're finally getting free."

Satsuki handed the mic back to Inumuta and ushered Ryuuko to follow her as they exited the command center. The halls were buzzing with activity as people moved and worked to pack everything before the mass exodus to anywhere but here. Ryuuko and Satsuki helped those with issues as they walked through the base, slipping into the barracks to check in with Mako.

They found Mako facing off against Sanageyama, donning a reworked version of her Two-Star Goku Uniform, now colored white and gold. Different pieces had been entirely changed while some were simply altered. She no longer wore her school uniform, but a special tailored top covering her in the similar cloth armor Gamagori used in the first version of his Goku Uniform, adorned in smaller pieces of golden armor and a black mock-corset. The same cloth armor covered her left arm down to the wrist, save for the white armor pieces on her elbows, and her hands covered in fingerless black gloves. Her skirt, now white and a tad bit longer, had barely any noticeable changes besides the color and length changes. Her school shoes were gone, replaced with black short-heeled knee-high boots. Her hat still sat on her head, torn in the back and black as night, and her right hand had her MAKO brass knuckles equipped. Her usual oversized jacket was nowhere visible, but Mako's body was covered by a jacket that was a carbon copy of it, white with black and gold accents with spokes adorned on the shoulders and sleeves.

"How's the uniform working out?" Ryuuko asked Iori. He was fast at work, sewing together the last pieces of a Two-Star uniform. Behind him, wrapped in a clean robe, was Omiko Hakodate. The tennis shark looked up as the girls approached, and bowed for Satsuki, but scowled at Ryuuko.

"Barely into it and she's proficient in its use. Mako easily passed the normal tests for the uniform, and decided to take it farther with Sanageyama. So far, Mako's up three to two with him," Iori replied, not moving his eyes from his work, "She could go out today in it. Still

a few added things I would like to tests with it, however, but they can wait until her match with Sanageyama is finished."

Ryuuko watched the fight as Satsuki filled Iori in on what was to happening, seeing the changes in Mako's style as she jumped away from an attack by Sanageyama. Mako was visibly panting but it did not stop her. She took her arms out of the sleeves of her jacket, and the article in question expanded out in a furious explosion of sound as it draped over her shoulder, the sleeves generating the black gloved hands it hid. Caught off guard, Sanageyama stumbled back as the force of the transformation hit. She launched one of her sentient jacket arms at Sanageyama, hitting him in the side and sending him flying to the right.

'So her uniform has a few new tricks,' Ryuuko thought with a smile, *'Now she's more unpredictable.'*

"... repairing the uniforms we can with what's left of the Sewing Club, but most were still at the Academy. Hakodate, your uniform should be fine now. Try it on inside the room."

"Thank you." Omiko took her completed uniform behind the curtained areas around the sewing stations. Ryuuko returned to Satsuki and sat up on Iori's now empty table.

"Nice trick with her jacket, Iori. Makes it easier for her to use when she needs it." Ryuuko commented. Satsuki turned to Mako's battle and watch, seeing her return her jacket to normal size, fight Sanageyama fiercely with her spiked bat. They watched as Sanageyama grabbed Mako by the arm and swung her around him until she hit the floor with a well-placed kick, Mako quickly rebounding and coming back up, kicking him in the face, before swiping his feet from under him and sending him sprawling out on his back. With him down, Mako effectively pinned him with two tools from under her coat and pressed the heel of her hand into his throat.

"Four to Mako, two to you." Mako panted down at him. Although his streak had all but dissolved by her and his ego bruised in the

sparring, he gave Mako high marks in her technique and utilization of her uniform. He was buttsore for the fact that he decided to go somewhat easy on the girl and ended up with his ass half-handed to him, but he did not hold back once Mako rolled easy into her uniform and fighting.

"Mankanshoku! There are still a few things to test. Once your done with Sanageyama, come over here." Iori called out. Almost immediately, Mako packed away her weapons and jogged over to Iori, passing Ryuuko and Satsuki without a look to them. Iori checked the stitching along the seams of her jacket as Mako lifted up her arms on command, plucking at the slightly visible ones until the threads bended to their willed nature and returned neatly into the fabric.

"Oh! Ryuuko and Lady Satsuki! When did you get here?" Mako asked her visitors as Iori stress tested threads in her uniform.

"A little bit ago. Nice fight with Sanageyama, by the way." Ryuuko told her, giving her a winning smile, "Good to see the idiot on his back, defeated."

"You want to go, Matoi?!" Sanageyama yelled from the other end of the barracks. Ryuuko cracked her knuckles and walked into the fighting area as Sanageyama did so, preparing for their sparring duel. Satsuki sighed as she watched the idiots circle each other, vicious snarls curling their lips.

"You've improved since your fight with Matoi. The way you fight is mature, efficient, unpredictable in points." Satsuki commented, returning her gaze to Mako. She blushed under Satsuki's compliments, a smile returning to her face.

"Thank you Lady Satsuki!"

"Your new uniform suits you well. Are you ready for the battle ahead?"

Mako took a deep breath. "I never wanted to fight, but if I must to save myself and those who are close to me, then I shall!"

Satsuki nodded. "Good answer."

As soon as Iori finished his last adjustments to her uniform and Mako could relax on top of the empty table, a doctor quickly followed by a nurse jogged in, capturing everyone's attention. Ryuuko and Sanageyama ceased their fighting, hands posed in attack between them. They reached Satsuki and quickly bent over to breathe, their run to the barracks from the other side of the base hitting them hard. The doctor stood up, and could barely contain her voice as he announced the news.

"Lady Satsuki, he's awake! Gamagoori woke up!"

Mako shot out of the barracks with Satsuki on her heels, the rest of the populous in the room they left still trying to comprehend what they just heard. People dodged them as they ran, nearly breaking people if they failed to notice them. They slid as they turned into the infirmary, slowing down into a jog as they passed people rushing through as well, packing up and helping people quicker than usual. The doctors in the intensive care unit parted the way into the deeper section, doctors leading them the way. They eventually slowed to a fast walk and stopped in front of the cut off section reserved for Gamagoori. They caught their breath, made sure they looked calm, and parted the curtains.

Gamagoori now sat up in his bed with his covers now removed, working out his fingers as they recovered as predicted quicker than his legs. He looked up as the barrier between him and the sterile white walls parted, and a smile broke across his face. Satsuki sighed in relief, while Mako gasped and started to jump to glomp him, but caught herself before she flew, making her fall to her face. Gamagoori exclaimed his surprise as Mako seemed to trip on air on to her face, and Satsuki helped Mako up as the fallen girl giggled and rubbed her red nose.

"I went for the glomp but realized that your still all hooked up to things and healing." Mako explained, her voice more nasally from the injury to her nostrils. Gamagoori groaned, but smiled quickly afterword as Mako made room for Satsuki to walk up beside him. He had a pained expression on his face as he saluted her, but completed the salute even with his body going against him.

"Good to see you conscious, Gamagoori."

"Thank you, Lady Satsuki. Forgive me for-"

Satsuki waved away his apology. "No need for such things. Besides, your girlfriend has proven herself to be much more than she appears."

"Mako?"

Mako rubbed the back of her head as she spoke happily. "I volunteered to take your place as Disciplinary Chair until you got back on your feet! I couldn't let Lady Satsuki be undefended, so I decided to represent you while you were healing. I even got a brand new Goku uniform, see?"

Gamagoori looked over Mako's new Goku Uniform, amazed that she would even think of taking up such a demanding job in his name. Tears pricked at the corners of his eyes, but they stayed put. Mako went way above herself for him, taking his mantle and protecting him like he had done for her. She smiled warmly and took one of his hands, holding it tight. He rested his salute and squeezed Mako's hand.

"Any improvement since you woke up?" Mako asked, her smile still present. He looked her way, then to Satsuki.

"It's hard to move my arms, but I can move my fingers." He demonstrated by moving all ten digits in a wave, "Unfortunately, my legs still won't move. Besides the paralysis, I'm on pain medication to

help with the rest of the pain and injuries, which hurt every time I move."

"So I'll be keeping your job for a while!" Mako cheered, though she obviously was not happy with the lack of immediate progress in the paralysis. Gamagoori's expression turned serious.

"Until I can stand! Once done, you are back as normal Mako Mankanshoku, keeping Matoi safe."

"Hey, hey Lady Satsuki. Can I keep the Goku Uniform once he takes back his job?" Mako asked.

Satsuki looked thoughtful for a moment before answering her with a hint of a smile. "Perhaps. It all depends on how this evacuation ends up."

Gamagoori started, looking over quickly to Satsuki. "Evacuation? We're leaving?"

Satsuki nodded. "We found a way out. I would work with the therapy to get your legs working again quickly."

"Of course! When do I start?"

Mako watched from the sidelines as Gamagoori worked through his physical therapy to get his legs back to working order. He could move his feet, but moving his legs turned out to be much more harder. She had lost count how many times he had fallen and had to figure out how to sit up and get upright again without moving his legs. She wanted to help him, but he looked determined to try on his own before help came his way. She sat in one of the hospital chairs she dragged in and tried to keep up with his failed attempts.

At about twenty-five, she stood and folded in her arms, her Goku Uniform jacket expanding out. She dug down under one of his arms, and offered her help. He looked conflicted but let Mako and her

uniform help him up. As he leaned on the bed and then sat on it, Mako rested down her jacket arms, the gloved hands disappeared into the sleeves.

"Break time?" Mako asked. Gamagoori agreed to the break and climbed up entirely into the bed, sighing greatly as he settled. Mako returned her jacket to normal size and came up beside Gamagoori, her hands weaving around his left hand. He squeezed back and looked up at her after a silent minute.

"I'm glad that you woke up. We were told that you may have never opened your eyes again."

Gamagoori's eyes widened in surprise but he did not vocally communicate the shock from the news. Mako continued to talk.

"I'm hoping you heard me when I visited you."

Gamagoori couldn't keep the smile off his face, the blush following suit. He slowly brought Mako closer, and cupped her face with one hand.

"I heard you."

Mako needed only those two words before tears fell, the happiest laugh she could give responding for her. She couldn't hold herself back as she kissed Gamagoori with all her pent-up emotions, keeping some semblance of control as their hands intertwined between them. Mako's heart pounded in her chest, about ready to burst out. She could feel Gamagoori's heart do the same thing, beating quickly under the skin of her palm.

Mako drew back, her smile stretching ear to ear. "I love you."

"I love you too." Gamagoori didn't miss a beat in telling her the same. Mako couldn't hold back her happiness as she jumped on him again, making him groan as his still weakly healed limbs underwent unneeded pressure, breaking the tender moment and bringing in the

needed laughter and relaxation to them before Mako left him to prepare for the bail out, Gamagoori working harder at his physical therapy to come out at a hundred percent. Mako could not knock the smile on her face, and it only grew as she ran at Ryuuko back in the barracks with news of Gamagoori and her revelations.

Night fell as the time came for the evacuation two days later, as the last Life Fiber assault cycle ended and the period of calm came. Two days of intensive work brought an entire base ready to run on their feet and with their trucks, Goku Uniforms repaired and made for many of the students, and Gamagoori mostly back on his feet. Although stuck with a temporary limp with limited a fair amount of quick movement, he could finally walk on both feet. He needed a cane to walk but he could finally move without people surrounding him.

He boarded the truck for the Elite Four and its supplies, cane hoisted up to him by Mako. She smiled down from her spot, arms on top of the gate.

"You're not getting on?" Gamagoori asked, worry crossing his face quickly. Mako shook her head.

"I still have your job. I'm on guard duty for the convoy; I'll be overhead on the buildings to make sure everyone gets to the boat alive."

Gamagoori waved to her come up to him, and she complied, walking up to him and climbing into his lap, kissing him as he went for the same thing.

"Please be safe." Gamagoori murmured against her lips as they parted. Mako nodded furiously.

"Of course! I can't leave you and Ryuuko and everyone."

Mako gave one last lingering kiss before disembarking from the truck, standing by as Iori and Inumuta piled in, data files in the forms of digital disks tucked underneath their arms within their protective cases. She replaced the gate to its rightful place and waved goodbye before jumping on the roof, then moving on to the rooftop alongside Ryuuko and Nonon. Both girls were hotly arguing, but they broke off when Mako joined.

Their communications buzzed as Satsuki chimed in. "Elite Four, Ryuuko. Go ahead and make sure our path is clear. Kill anyone opposing you."

Everyone echoed their confirmations and shot out from their spots, leading the pack of trucks and walking personnel and beginning their jobs as their shields. For a mile, nothing came up for the guards to attack besides the stray Life Fiber bundle that forgot to follow its own kind. The trucks stopped once to move a large pile of what could only be called a human bonfire. Charred remains of students and their families piled into a hill in the middle of the road, a silver sheath and sword resting on top of it. Tied to the hilt was a strip of cloth, and written in blood were the words 'We're Coming'.

"We're coming? Something know's we're moving." Satsuki murmured as she took the sword from its spot, staring at the message. "Alright! We must move quicker before whatever is coming gets here. Move out! Guards, move ahead!"

Ryuuko shot forward from the pile, skirt bellowing behind her as she re-synchronized with Senketsu. Mako followed near by her, Nonon flanking her from the left, while Sanageyama rose above them all. They had an enemy to watch out for that knew of their movement. Ears on the alert and eyes wide open, Mako hoped that they could get to the boat without violence or battle.

"Stray COVER, Mako, at your three." Nonon's voice came through her ear piece, and Mako looked to find that stray COVER on her three, noticing her as she jumped at it, swinging her bat at it to knock it out. Ryuuko jumped over and sliced through it, a student bound in

dissolving Life Fibers falling down into the arms of awaiting One Stars. Quick flashes of communications had Nonon and Sanageyama falling to the back of the convoy, to ensure of no sneak attacks from behind.

Mako stumbled quickly as a broken roof tile slid from under her, sending her to her knees. The intense buzzing of the Life Fibers hit her ears and slammed into her chest like Gamagoori's angry voice. She barely had time to dodge as she jumped from her spot, the space she left exploding into roof tiles and plaster. Red flashed in her peripherals as Ryuuko slashed through the tangle of Fibers heading for her. Mako looked up toward the end of their path, and saw the boat. Relief flooded her, but when she looked around her, distraught buried her relief. Life Fibers surrounded them in a storm-like cloud, explosions and weapons flying through the tangle of red webs around them.

Mako pulled out her bat, jumped as high as she could, and opened fire on them, her missile entering the storm and blowing a fair size hole into it. It did not fill in the holes appearing, but it continued to attack. Satsuki shouted orders through communications to move faster, and they did quickly. The defense moved with them, attacking when enemies came too close. Turrets were firing off every bullet they could. Cover's broke through and attacked widely, making mistakes enough for the Elite Four and Ryuuko to exploit and save the students inside them.

They arrived at the docks as the cloud of red went back, attacking passively as people unloaded and raced for the boat as the cargo doors opened, Tsumugu and Mikisugi disappearing inside to start it up. Satsuki and the Elite ushered people inside, Gamagoori included. The trucks with equipment drove in quickly as masses ran for safety within the boat. Those who could fight stayed outside, attacking when they could. Mako jumped through the fray, slashing out at Life Fibers and COVERS as she raced to get to the boat. She had fallen behind to help out Nonon, who ran now into the boat with injuries. Mako jumped down from the buildings, running for home.

Life Fibers tangled around her as she let her jacket resize, pulling her into the air. She struggled and screamed as she was brought higher by the COVER who caught her, arms bound behind her back. She screamed for anyone, but enemies flanked every available fighter as she found herself captured. She couldn't rely on anyone's help, not even her own. She couldn't reach her weapons and cutting through it became obsolete as her only weapons that could cut through it fell to the ground.

"MAKO!"

She opened her eyes to see Gamagoori run for her, jumping off the offered net of Omiko's tennis racket, reaching for her. Mako wormed one arm out of her Life Fiber binds and reached out for him, stretching as far as she could. She could make out the desperation on his face before COVERS grabbed him, sending him to the ground fast, leaving Mako to ascend up into the air. She could see Ryuuko struggle against her opponents, watching in horror with Gamagoori as Mako yelled for help one last time, and disappeared into the COVER.

Ryuuko inst-killed her attackers and rushed to Gamagoori's aid, opening the COVERS up and letting the students free. They were helped up by Nonon, and Ryuuko helped Gamagoori to his feet as the foghorn of the boat rang out, calling for the defenders to enter before cast off. Pain echoed through them as they ran inside waiting as the COVER who took Mako grew her Goku Uniform's spikes, blew them apart and took the Life Fiber's inside of it. For the shortest moment they could see Mako in the tangle of Life Fibers, but the doors of the cargo bay closed on them as they left Honnou City and their lost comrades behind them.

"What happened?" Satsuki demanded as Ryuuko and Gamagoori finally arrived at command center. Gamagoori collapsed into a chair for him, stretching out his legs under the shadow of his untidy hair. Everyone came to their feet as they sensed the mood coming from their late allies, dread filling them quickly. Ryuuko slammed her

hands down on the digital tabletop, tears falling from her hidden eyes.

"We lost Mako to a COVER, that's what *fucking* happened."

The First Mistakes

The silent hush over the boat made the trip to Osaka cold enough to freeze. The news of Mako's capture chilled everyone it came to, but it hurt those in the command center down to the core. Once the news broke over the ship, many decided to prepare for war, to fight to get those they lost back. They were down now several club leaders and hundreds of normal students, not including those lost before the break for freedom. Time went on without much chatter from anyone afterword, and the halls Gamagoori roamed were as silent as the dead. People he walked by parted for him, letting the crestfallen Elite pass without issue. He had paced through the halls of B deck four times now, from one end to another, lost within his thoughts and heart. The impact of watching Mako struggle against her captors and letting her go hurt him every time a sliver of the memory found its way back to replay.

No matter what he tried to think, he was the reason she got taken. He failed to save her, he failed to reach farther to grab her.

He stopped his steps. He needed to stop thinking negatively, naïvely like a child. His thoughts were simply going to throw him into a depressive stupor without a chance for it to disappear. He needed to stop thinking, even for a minute. He had to find a distraction. Where could he go to find the right distraction?

"Oi, Gamagoori!"

Gamagoori looked up to the balcony above him, finding Sanageyama's torso hanging over it. He had forgotten that a single section of B and A deck were layered over each other and opened like a courtyard, access ramps for either deck available to go between the balconies overhead or the halls below.

"Get your ass up to A deck. We're sparring!"

'That'll work', Gamagoori thought as he sprinted up to A deck, simply glad that a distraction came from above.

Sparring spared his mind his depressive thoughts for a while, the adrenaline running through his iced over veins waking what primal wants remained within him. His depression kept his size larger than Sanageyama but he was obviously keeping it controlled. The back and forth repetition of blows and kicks, combined with a few tricks kept Gamagoori's mind clear of distractions, but also empty of moral correction. Multiple occasions arose where he simply lashed out on him, letting himself completely free in every attack he unleashed. His anger, his fury, every boiling emotion from the last battle came out in waves of unaltered attacks and unwavering ferocity.

"God dammit, Gamagoori, what the hell?"

Gamagoori sequestered himself from his opponent, trying to understand why he had lost control. Sanageyama wrapped the last of his wounds and brushed himself off.

"What's happened to you anyway, it's as if you're not thinking anymore!"

Gamagoori realized that Sanageyama was correct. He wasn't thinking. He didn't dare think for fear of seeing Mako. His lack of cohesive thought lead him to act on every negative emotion he kept under lock and key.

"Forgive me Sanageyama. I... I wasn't thinking at all. I hoped that this would help keep some issues at bay, but all it did was create new ones."

Sanageyama looked up at him, then turned back to the wall. "You need to get off her already, she's gone."

Gamagoori didn't remember what happened after those words left Sanageyama's mouth. He could remember the smallest glimpse of

Sanageyama lying in the remains of a locker, blood dripping down his forehead, but besides that his memory went missing. For a while, all he could do was shift through the blankness of his mind, until he found his mind knocking him down, throwing into unconsciousness.

He woke up to the sound of machines clicking and making various sounds and the pinch of a needle in his left arm. He could make out muffled words, but he couldn't hear them clearly. He could barely open his eyes, finding the world around him blurry and disoriented, but he could obviously tell that Ryuuko and Satsuki were in sight. He could not tell if they were arguing or simply discussing something, but Ryuuko looked his way, familiar emotions he had felt reflecting in her eyes. He winced as another needle poked into his skin, this one sending him back into the dark instantly.

The next instance of consciousness came with the screaming of every muscles in his chest and shoulders and the sharp instance of pain as another needle poked into his wrist.

"That should keep the bruises from hurting much."

"Matoi?"

Ryuuko sat beside him, one hand holding up her head while the other played with the hem of her skirt. "Morning, giant. Remember anything?"

"Not at all." Gamagoori answered silently, trying once more to look through the gaps, "I remember sparring with Sanageyama, after that... it's blank."

Ryuuko smiled, standing up and poking at a dark bruise on Gamagoori's shoulder. "I'll fill you in then. You nearly killed Sanageyama in a hysterical rage damn near close to my incident with that frilly Satan, Nui."

Gamagoori sat up quickly, trying to comprehend how he lost control. Ryuuko saw his plight, and poked at his forehead, earning her his

attention, although the stare he gave grew heated.

"I'm honestly glad you did what you did. What he told you to trigger that rage... must have involved Mako."

Gamagoori's memory fired up, showing him the last words he heard from Sanageyama, and everything clicked in place. He was angry, he was tired of losing, he snapped by the taunt and mistake of one person.

"He told me to forget her, that she was gone." He told Ryuuko, "I've been battling demons, and he opened the gate and let them attack."

Ryuuko was silent for a moment before turning her attention to her Kamui, his eye leading his conversation. Gamagoori flexed everything slowly, the bruises and cuts lining his upper torso not entirely compliant with his body's orders. As he went to pull the IV still in the crook of his elbow, Ryuuko grabbed the approaching hand and stalled the removal.

"The moment you get off the morphine, you'll be hurting. Sanageyama did a number on you as well."

"I've had worse, and not from the likes of Sanageyama. Let me move, Matoi."

"Fine by me."

Gamagoori should have followed Ryuuko's advice, but he moved with the upmost caution as he found out that in the process of his rage, Sanageyama broke three of his ribs and his chest did not want to move in the slightest. He was standing, admittedly with the most annoying of remaining limbs from his paralysis, but he found it difficult to breath without pain shocking through his chest. Ryuuko smiled as she lead him out, watching in obvious amusement as Gamagoori fought making a face as pain echoed through his wounded rib cage.

"Regretting the loss of that morphine yet?"

"Not as much as you hope for, Matoi."

"Heh... you know something, Gamagoori?"

"Hm?"

Ryuuko stopped in his path, turning around to face him. "I'm glad Mako has you in her life. It means the world has to face two of the strongest people this side of Japan."

They continued their walk though the ship, simply passing information back and forth they learned through their travels through the ship, or simply talking about what happened while Gamagoori was unconscious earlier. The ship and its surroundings continued on in its muted silence, the crew and its survivors preparing and healing for the next battle they knew that was to come. Satsuki eventually called for a meeting of the Elite, and not a minute later everyone had gathered, excluding Sanageyama who connected to the room via webcam. Ryuuko stood off to the side, but stayed close to Gamagoori, who took his place nearest Satsuki.

"We'll be arriving in Osaka within the next hour. From there, we'll set base up within the walls of the Nudist Beach base. A large portion, courtesy of us, is still in rubble and shambles, but most of the base is still standing, and in better condition. We are unable to launch an offensive on Ragyo and the Life Fibers until we can secure our assets; the other high schools around Japan.

"If we can keep the Life Fibers from taking control of the schools, we should stand a chance to try to hit her again, and hopefully take back our academy. Now I realize that we now lack the proper facilities to truly repair your Goku Uniforms, which means that you Elite must make them last as long as you can make them. They will rip and tear like any other garment, and when the Life Fibers inside start to fray and break, your uniform will break and disappear. You may still use them, but be cautious of the damage it takes and how long you use

it. The longer you use it and the more damage it takes, the less time you have left with it.

"Iori, seeing that we don't have facilities for Goku Uniforms, I need you to take up researching and prototyping for me. I have a design I would like to see come to fruition."

Iori saluted. "Of course, Lady Satsuki."

Satsuki directed her attention to Gamagoori, a smile quickly coming to her face before it disappeared. "Gamagoori, you're up again. Did Ryuuko fill you in?"

"Yep!" Ryuuko butted in, "The funny thing is that he didn't remember any of it. The memories from when he threw the first punch from when we had to get him to stop are all missing."

Inumuta's interest peaked, his eyes falling to his PDA as he typed quickly the new revelation, obviously planning to interrogate him later on for more data. "Interesting."

"Sanageyama." Satsuki snapped, the monkey Elite immediately knowing what he had to do. Even with his face bruised in most spots, he sighed, followed by a grimace, and pointed his attention to Gamagoori.

"Sorry for saying what I did, Gamagoori. It was the entirely wrong thing to say."

Gamagoori looked at the bruised image of Sanageyama. "Forgive me for nearly killing you."

"We're good. I deserved it!"

Satsuki waved down their conversation. "Back to business. Our plan will be to build up resistance here in Osaka, keep our conquered schools under our hands, and rescue anyone we can."

The room hushed at the last piece of the plan. Everyone knew what it meant. Satsuki nodded and brought up a map of the Academy on the hologram table between them.

"I've also formulated a plan to rescue those captured by COVERS during our escape. Thanks to Iori's help, we embedded a tracker within Mako's Goku Uniform. If the COVER that swallowed her did not destroy it, we should get a signal in a few moments. Inumuta, load the tracker program."

"On it."

Inumuta quickly input a code sequence into the tablet in his hands, and looked into the hologram. Tension rose as they waited for the signal from Mako, Ryuuko now by Nonon as they watched the hologram shiver for a moment before a tiny neon blue blip appeared on the map within the Two-Star complexes.

Sighs of relief came from everyone, cheers leaving from Ryuuko and Gamagoori. Satsuki whispered under her breath, 'Thank goodness', which no one thankfully heard.

"Alright. Once we land and settle in enough to survive, we're saving her and anyone else. Gamagoori, Nonon, Matoi, you'll be joining me in this operation.

"Yes, Lady Satsuki!" her Elite cheered, while Ryuuko nodded, smirking the entire time.

Osaka arrived on the horizon quickly, and everyone sped up the unloading process as quickly as possible as they cleared rubble in their way, opening up the once reclusive Nudist Base once more for operation. By the time the sun set on the day, everyone had left the ship and settled within the base, setting to work just as quickly to clean the place up and get whatever they could into working order once more. Once ordinary families and students rose to the cause to find a temporary home within the metal walls of the base, and all of it

brought a smile to Satsuki's face even with the grim circumstances surrounding their arrival here.

"Satsuki?"

Satsuki turned from her spot in the observation deck and found Nonon standing in the doorway.

"Nonon... I thought you were preparing for the return rescue."

"I finished a while ago. My uniform's been patched as you recommended and what I need is on the shuttle. I was hoping to talk to you."

Satsuki nodded, waving Nonon inside the private room and closing the door behind the Elite as she walked inside.

"What happens if we encounter Ragyo?" Nonon did not hold back, even though she knew she would regret her question. She saw Satsuki flinch before she covered and hid away her reaction.

"We fight her as we originally planned. Relax, Nonon. I'll be fine. How is everyone else?" Satsuki gave Nonon a friendly nudge, the air around them lightening up. Nonon smiled and joined Satsuki in looking through the glass in front of them, watching Nudist Beach operatives move crates and build their DTRs with impressive efficiency.

"Gamagoori and the transfer student are working together. It's weird to see them working together. The enforcer and the rebel."

"They have a common goal. Most likely when this is over, they'll be back to fighting each other. For now, they have a common person and goal to relate to."

Said enforcer and rebel worked quickly as they prepared for the battle ahead, sparring to blow off any unneeded tension and trouble between them for the time being. Ryuuko fought without Senketsu,

simply relying on her skill sets and insanely durable body to spare with Gamagoori even with the uneasiness with having Senketsu off. Even without him on, Ryuuko avoided punches and kicks with ease, landing hits with great accuracy. Gamagoori got few hits in, but those that landed hurt like hell.

"How are you dodging so well?" Gamagoori asked during their break between rounds. Ryuuko looked over at Senketsu and stretched out her arms over her head.

"Thanks to Senketsu, and some other thing I don't know about, I don't exactly know, I became a bit of a telepathic, so I can tell most of the time where you're moving and what you're attempting."

Gamagoori looked darkly back at Ryuuko, not saying a word. Ryuuko rose her hands in defense, trying to keep peace between them.

"It's not like I can control it! If I could, I would stop... okay, okay, I'll try. Just for your information, I haven't been able to read into Satsuki's thoughts, and my ability has only read into Mako twice. You're just easy to read right now because you stopped thinking, which means you're open."

"You know why I do such."

Ryuuko rose up her hands, this time in attack, signaling their return to sparring. Gamagoori cleared his thoughts, and the haze blocking Ryuuko from his thoughts went transparent. She anticipated his quick left hook, spinning around it and grabbing his wrist. She probed his thoughts but bounced back, and took a back hit into his stomach.

"Nice one-way shield." Ryuuko huffed as she recovered, sending her leg up into a high kick, barely missing Gamagoori's chin. She landed and jumped back into a backflip as Gamagoori sent out his leg.

"You're learning to stop peeking into my thoughts, I'm learning to block your ability." Gamagoori replied, a smirk curling his lips before he side-stepped Ryuuko's string of punches before going for a partly dirty move and elbowing Ryuuko in the shoulder, getting only a swift kick to the shin in return. His leg crumpled but he did not go down. He used his position to roll under Ryuuko's legs as they flipped out and swiped her balancing leg from under her, sending her to the ground. Ryuuko quickly jumped up and blocked Gamagoori's huge fist as it came at her, holding it right in front of her face.

"You're not reading me." It wasn't a question, and Ryuuko nodded.

"I found a way to keep my mind from infiltrating yours. I can however tell you stopped thinking again, and you dropped that shield."

Gamagoori grinned. "Leave it at that then. When I have things with the upmost importance to tell, I'll drop the shield and let you in. When I'm not, or my normal defenses are up, stay out of my thoughts."

Ryuuko let go of Gamagoori's hand, and their fight concluded on a draw. "I'll agree to the terms. Besides, I don't want to look into your thoughts when your with her. I bet you're just swarming with perverted fantasies."

Gamagoori looked offended. "Do you really think I fantasize about Mako that way?"

"Not even a little? Or do I have to do some digging, huh?"

Gamagoori went silent, blush rising to his cheeks and betraying him enough for Ryuuko to laugh. He defended himself weakly, but Ryuuko didn't digress her interrogation, simply glad that what she found wasn't horrible nad nauseating, but rather sweet. He wasn't the wiser that she dove into his private thoughts, but he knew that there was no way avoiding having some privacy with Mako being herself and Ryuuko being a telepathic.

"You know... as long as you don't hurt her, or try to push her into anything of that sort, you're fine with me. You don't have to worry 'bout me. It's her father and mother."

"I already got their blessing, though." Gamagoori said, confused. Ryuuko shook her head and sat across from him.

"To date her, not to screw her."

Gamagoori's face went red quickly before he collected himself. He cleared his throat to give himself more time. "I don't plan to do anything of this sort until she says she wants to. We agreed to this before the war started. Nothing of the sort happens or is brought into fruition unless given prior consent, even then we have to agree on what is to be done that is within our limits."

Ryuuko smiled for a moment, moving quickly to where Senketsu sat, brushing his lapels softly. "You're not so bad, giant. What's going to happen once all Life Fibers are caput, and Satsuki's rainbow mother is put down?"

Gamagoori shrugged, and went to change back into his Goku Uniform, turning around to give Ryuuko some privacy. "Between Mako and I, or all of us in general?"

"I guess you two, then the rest."

"I hope to continue our relationship, onward as far as possible." Gamagoori did not hesitate, and he opened his mind to show what he had in mind. Ryuuko let a soft gasp as her thoughts flooded with his vision, but she smiled.

"I'm a bridesmaid, and you will deal no matter what fuss I throw. I also get say in the choice of cake."

"As long as you don't change the entire thing around in favor to you."

Ryuuko laughed loudly, adjusting Senketsu as she put him on. She mentally poked Gamagoori, and he turned around, pulling on his uniform top and securing it.

"I can't believe we're talking about a wedding years down the damn road like it's destined to happen." Ryuuko chuckled as they walked out.

"It is destined! Why do you think we're going to save her? To further our futures!"

"Dream on, big guy! Look, just make sure she's happy. I get a vote in this matter as Mako's closest friend, and it could sway with a single tear from her."

Gamagoori nodded, respecting the rules he knew were in place.
"And I will see yours as the most important after her father's vote."

"Heh, it better be."

Nui swung her legs back and forth as she watched her small army of COVERS gather and settle down. Various sizes of her pets moved as they were allowed, but Nui noticed that one seemed larger than the others. She watched as it turned toward the general direction that once housed the huge ship that Satsuki took. This COVER looked strange with a spike coming from each wrists, and alarms in Nui's thoughts started going off with the rare addition to the Life Fiber puppet.

"Come over you~" she beckoned it, making the odd COVER come to her reach. She jumped from her spot and walked calmly to the COVER, making sure it showed its wrists to her first. She tugged at the mysterious spikes, watching it detach and reattach without her consent. Nui's brows tightened, and she looked up at the COVER.

"Who's your battery?" Nui demanded nicely, blinking her eyes. The COVER responded to her as its buttons popped open and revealed

the human inside of it, powering it. Nui laughed as she saw the nude student within the suit, bound and held in place suspended within the alien powerhouse.

Nui did not expect to find Mako nested within the nest of Life Fibers binding the COVER together. She patted the top of the girl's head and sharply lifted her head until her closed eyes came in line with hers, looking at Mako's peaceful face as she slept away the process of losing her life.

"The annoying coconut got caught monologuing." Nui sighed dreamily, "And now you're food for the Life Fibers."

She did not expect Mako to answer but she moved one end of her lips up into a smile. Nui smiled, but she hated the annoying brunette's attempts to fix everything. Her pointless, rambling speeches did nothing but annoy her to no end, especially since she got in the way of playing with Ryuuko and seeing her at her prettiest. The girl whom she wanted dead for so long now rested within her reach, unable to fight her in any way without risking death.

"What to do with you, you pathetic little brat?" Nui mumbled, turning Mako's head this way and that, seeing how she could move the girl, "I could easily end your life right now, but that would be wrong and messy. You're needed to get Ryuuko and Satsuki back here. I can't let such a pretty, pointless pawn die just yet."

Nui bared Mako's neck, poking at the pulsing veins underneath. "I could leave a present in you. Something nice and infesting, to keep you under check~. Would you like that, Mako? Would you like a piece of me embedded into your body?"

Nui's smile widened. "You wouldn't, which is why I should, but at the same time I think a worse punishment would be better for you."

Nui tapped her fingers against Mako's forehead, dragging one sharp nail down, leaving a cut behind which dribbles blood. Nui gladly

scraped the escaping red substance and greedily licked her bloodied fingers, spitting out the blood at the first taste.

"Too coppery and salty. Disgusting, just like you~." Nui joyfully noted. She cut another thin long line into Mako, watching with glee as the girl's forehead bled. She slowly walked her fingers down Mako's face until she held her chin delicately.

"I want to break and kill you so badly, but I think you killing your friends is a better thing right now, but I'll get my wish... later."

Nui poked one of Mako's cheeks, watching as she messed with them until she grew satisfied. Blood still dripped from the wounds on her forehead, and new fresh blood joined it as cuts on her cheeks opened up. The COVER, even when obeying Nui's orders, quickly repaired the damage to ensure the longest use of the human battery, and Nui let it do so.

"Hmm... I could do something, but it's risky, for you at least Mako! Now I just need to open a hole in your head for a quick moment..."

Ten minutes later, Nui sealed shut the incision she made in Mako's head, patting the area as she backed away from the COVER. She could feel her work start its job, and she shivered in anticipation.

"That should help in the future. Now, you. Lead the pack, use everything against them when they come."

The COVER tucked Mako back inside her Life Fiber cradle and sealed its front again, the spikes appearing once more on its wrists. Nui turned her back to it and stepped up on the raised ground, sitting once again in her spot as she watched her small army linger around awaiting the battle to start soon. She giggled as the Academy equivalent of a fog horn went off, signalling her needed return to finish her original job. She stood up with a small bounce, brushing her dress clean of the dirt collected, and looked over the group once more.

A wicked smile appeared for a moment before her usually overly peppy personality took the reigns, and she skipped back toward Ragyo.

"Now to only get our last little pieces and the chest board is complete~" Nui sang as she left the COVERS in their places, oblivious to the specks on the horizon coming from the direction of Osaka.

The Ultimate Betrayals

Gamagoori couldn't keep his eyes off of the approaching land that held Honnōji Academy, his hands flexing as his body adjusted to the new weight of the Life Fibers in his uniform. It felt odd returning to a Goku Uniform, his body unattuned to the power and alien attachment the uniform gave off, but it became easy to adjust to the obedient power of the Life Fiber-laced Goku Uniform.

He shook off his temporary look-back and kept his eyes on the fires and smoke plumes rising above the city, his heart playing ping-pong in his chest. Even with the tracker still working, it did not spell an easy extraction for her. Add the facts that Nui had to be dealt with and Ragyo still needed to be brought down from her throne and everything became a complicated mish-mash of plans and operations. As obvious as it was, Lady Satsuki built a well-thought plan out of the leftovers of the unused plans, and part one went into effect in four minutes when they found their dropoff point.

"Gamagoori."

He turned toward Ryuuko, hand already resting on his shoulder. Over the past few hours preparing for the operation, they found themselves developing out of their rough, frenemies relationship to one of mutual respect and kindness, bonding over their joint care and closeness to Mako. Her proximity, once threatening, now gave him some peace of mind. He relaxed enough to focus once more on the objective, and Satsuki's commanding tone through his earpiece.

"When we land, do not immediately head for the COVER with Mako inside. Nui would have either set up defenses strong enough to block her or set a trap for us when we try to free her. Focus your attention on any other forces. Iori believes that since she was taken hostage wearing her uniform, the COVER could have taken some element of the uniform, so keep an eye open."

Ryuuko scoffed. "We're trying to save her, but we don't go directly for her?"

"She may still trying to take down her mother." Gamagoori noted, "It was the one thing she hoped would happen for many years."

Ryuuko hummed in annoyance, turning her attention to the ground as they flew over the far coast of the city, fires rising up below them. The still surviving people of the town could be heard screaming, the Life Fiber army Ragyo commanded tearing them to pieces before the eyes of no one who cared. Gamagoori did his best to tune out those screams, memories still raw from his escape threatening his leveled head.

"Landing site in sight. All combatants prepare for bail out, I repeat, prepare for bail out."

The helicopters turned sharp to the left, the bare area of burned away wooden shacks and stands showing up in their sights. Ryuuko adjusted Senketsu once more before coming up alongside Gamagoori as the side door opened, winding whipping around them. Ryuuko threw out their respective grapple ropes and they descended along with the others to the ground. The helicopters flew back to base as the ground forces collected up and worked their way through the rubble and buildings up toward the flatland that would lead them toward the Two Star apartments.

COVERS were awaiting them when they came out of the cover of the buildings, a pack of twelve buffed-up alien suits lining the elevated level above them, one ahead of the others, waiting on the stairs that lead upward. Satsuki and Ryuuko stepped forward, transforming before running ahead, leading the pack as the COVER suits came down two by two, assaulting the team as they lashed out. The leader of the group stayed rooted in its spot, the abnormal spikes twitching on its shoulders and wrists. Gamagoori watched it shake as he slammed his hand down on a COVER, destroying the suit and freeing the student within. His heavy suit shielded his

glistening eyes as he watched the suit turn toward him, the heavy hands appearing curling up into fists.

He knew that it was Mako. She was still fighting and struggling for freedom, even under the spell of pure Life Fibers. He kept control of his emotions, and joined the fight once more, warning and preparing as the next wave arrived at the wave of the COVER still standing its ground on the stairs. It controlled the forces surging toward them, but did not act or attack. It simply stood watch as its soldiers went forth and fell.

The COVER moved quickly, and Gamagoori dodged its spiked fists as it attacked him. He knew that it was Mako inside of it, but still he knew he had to fight. He brought out his whips, and slashed at it, once, twice, three times in succession. Each hit missed its mark, but the spikes on it receded, and the true attacks started, relentlessly hitting Gamagoori until he finally hit it twice, knocking it through a building. The COVER rippled like water as it stood again, quickly fleeing back on to the stairs, the spikes returning and turning toward him.

Nonon sent an attack toward it, targeting it without remorse. It dodged with ease, quicker than anything they'd encountered, and disappeared before the dust settled. More COVERS came down, but they killed as they mounted the stairs, running quickly as they could to the higher levels. As the COVER waves ended, and they neared Two Star territory, Nui appeared above them on a high building.

"Did you think I would let you simply waltz up to Lady Ragyo? Prepare for your end, stupid monkeys of the Academy!"

White and Red blurred above them as it crashed to their left, the dust and rubble rising up to hide what had landed. Their last enemies stayed within the cloud of debris, the rebels preparing for whatever may rest within.

Everyone turned to face their final opponents as the dust faded, only to gasp in utter disbelief at the leader of the pack. Ryuuko gripped her

scissor blade tighter, trying to hold it together as Mako walked toward them, COVER suits falling behind her. Gamagoori shivered in his Goku Uniform, his reaction visible through the heavy mummy-like armor.

Mako looked none different physically, but what she wore scared them all. She donned an actual COVER suit, the alien clothing wrapping around her like a second skin. The suit had actually altered its look to appear like the sailor uniform she once donned, skirt blowing gently in the breeze whipping around them. She did not look at them, her eyes closed even though she still trekked closer to them. Only when her name was called by Gamagoori did she stop, brushing her hair out of her face.

Her eyes were pure fire and rage when they opened, and Satsuki had barely a second to dodge her attack as she rocketed toward her, snarling like a dog as she slammed her fist toward her, sending asphalt and dirt flying around her. Satsuki took some of the hit, jumping away quickly and transforming once more, sending out an attack using Bakuzan. Everyone mobilized as Mako's COVER reinforces went on the offensive, randomly slashing out at several targets. Mako focused in on Satsuki, the sleeves of her COVER enlarging into weapons. As their weapons clashed, sending them away from each other, Satsuki dared try to communicate.

"Mako, snap out of this nonsense!"

Mako's head tilted, her sleeves returning to normal. "Why? Do you know how much power these have?"

"That suit is doing nothing but controlling you, using you for my mother's own twisted vision!"

"Perhaps..."

"Where is the Mako that stood up to me, who took a stand despite almost losing something precious to her? You're losing yourself, and if I must rip that COVER off of you to free you, I will." Satsuki

warned, raising Bakuzan toward Mako. The brunette lowered her head and laughed until she showed her face, a dark expression and sly smile greeting Satsuki.

"I would love to see you try, Lady Satsuki."

Satsuki charged at her, rearing up Bakuzan to slice through Mako as her opponent barely breathed as she approached, showing no plans to dodge her blow. Satsuki roared out as she brought her sword through an ark, hitting nothing but air and making her stumble forward.

Above the fight, sitting on a building's ledge with the best view of the fight, Nui laughed at Satsuki's failure.

"Activate." Nui whispered, watching the air behind Satsuki shimmer and shift.

Mako reappeared out of thin air behind Satsuki, sharpened sleeves raised above her as Satsuki recovered and turned toward her in astonishment. As Mako's smile twisted into an ugly smile, she brought her arms down, slicing downward at Satsuki, blowing her back far enough to slam into the buildings twenty feet away. Mako landed daintily on her feet, calmly walking up to the collapsed side of the building as Satsuki untangled herself from the pile of brick and metal frame, hurt by her impact with the wall. She raised Bakuzan once more, stopping Mako's approach.

"I'm surprised you can stand right, Lady Satsuki! I thought I would have broken a limb with the way you flew." Mako exclaimed as Satsuki stepped out of the rubble.

"I will not break. I have not broken in the hands of my mother, I will not by the hands of her puppet." Satsuki's voice had gone icy cold, her words biting into the Mako locked away under the Life Fibers.

"I am not her puppet, silly. I chose to wear it, Nui showed me how to wear it."

Satsuki started. "Nui?"

"Yep. She showed me how to don this powerful suit so I could fight against you, and everyone."

"The real Mako would fight Nui."

Mako face grew dark. "Why would I fight someone who finally made me powerful enough to destroy a dictator?"

"My mother is the dictator here, not me."

"LIAR!" Mako screeched, and launched from her spot and assaulted Satsuki, sending her back into the building. Satsuki stood and rolled away from an explosive attack from Mako, cement flying around as Satsuki ran from Mako and back into open air. Mako sprinted after her and threw attacks when she could, her speed and power increasing with each matched attack.

As Mako huffed a few feet away from Satsuki, her stamina drained, Satsuki yelled for Ryuuko. As Mako went to look, Ryuuko had her scissor blade pressed to her back, the sharp side digging into the suits enough to have Mako yelping in pain. Mako struggled against Ryuuko's hold, but she had enough strength to pull something out of thin air.

"Not happening." Mako hissed, and she opened the cylinder she held up, and pressed the button before they could react.

The explosion that ripped around the threesome sent everyone who wasn't in the blast radius running for cover, and sent Nonon and Gamagoori into shock as they watched Satsuki, Ryuuko, and Mako sit in the eye of the explosion, unable to see what had become of them until the dust began to settle, and blinding light hit them. Gamagoori transformed out of his uniform, the heavy mask not helping in keeping the light blocked, shielding his eyes alongside Nonon and Lady Ragyo stepped forward above them.

She looked at them, but directed her attention to the crater below, a wicked little smile on her lips as she sent four mind-controlled Sewing Club members to retrieve her 'prize'.

"Ira!" Nonon whispered, pointing away from Ragyo, but to the rooftops over on the other side of the crater.

Nui, with a limp, barely breathing Mako in her arms stood forty feet away. Gamagoori snarled, rage coiled in his stomach now released. He unwinded a length of whip, and sent it toward Nui as she turned her back to him. Nui easily predicted his attack and jumped out-of-the-way, keeping Mako carefully balanced in her arms. He jumped closer, taking the risk of getting caught by Ragyo, and launched his whips once more at a closer range, missing both times as Nui jumped and dodged with inhuman grace and skill, Mako barely jostled in her arms. When her eye fluttered open a crack, Nui covered them with a gentle touch of her hand, opened her umbrella, effectively dodging Gamagoori's next torrent of attacks, spun and disappeared, leaving Gamagoori's heart to sink into oblivion once more.

He saw Ryuuko among the rubble and rock of the explosion, and fought off leftover forces to reach her, running for her until Ragyo made sure he stayed put, pushing him back to his starting point with the help of her minions, explosions rocking the entire area. His ears rang painfully, and he knew everyone in the vicinity would be hearing nothing as well. Ryuuko charged at Ragyo, but was easily deflected. Gamagoori watched as Ragyo stopped Ryuuko in her tracks, and stopped his heart in his chest, as the rainbow-backlit mother dug her hand into Ryuuko's chest without a sweat, and pulled what resembled a heart out. It glowed and sparkled like Life Fibers, and Gamagoori did not believe what he heard as his hearing finally cleared.

"... daughter of mine."

He didn't need to hear more. Ryuuko shot away, Senketsu transforming for her as she stumbled down the hill, not bothering to

defend herself as she moved as fast as she could from Ragyo, fear and disbelief etched into her face. Gamagoori supported her as she ran to him, unable to stand and keep Senketsu synchronized. He gathered the unconscious Ryuuko up, and faced his confusion to the series of events, but could not understand them.

He heard orders run through his earpiece, calling for immediate retreat. He saw Nonon hesitate as well, not wanting to leave Satsuki in the hands of her dictator mother, but they knew they would not be able to face Ragyo now. It would only lead to their deaths. With the worst of their guilt sitting painfully in their chests, they fled with what was left of their failed rescue squad, and left two very important figures that they could not save.

"Nui." Ragyo snapped, not leaving the sight of Satsuki as she was pulled unconscious from the wreckage, carefully carried up to her. Her hands grazed over the bare patches of skin on her stomach and chest, her lips lightly tugging into a smile.

" *Oui*, mama?" Nui appeared behind her, a COVER-covered Mako still in her arms, blood dripping down one of the brunette's arms.

"Is she alright?"

Nonon shifted Mako slightly in her arms, Mako's head resting on Nui's shoulder. "She'll be fine, just a little beaten up. The dead COVER on her kept her alive."

Ragyo nodded. "Good. We need her alive, and well for the next stage. Take her inside, have her healed. Replace the COVER until she can bear the next burden."

"Yes, Lady Ragyo."

She directed her voice then to the mind-stitched students carrying her daughter. "Have Satsuki put in the cage in the basement, strip her of that garment. Such clothing won't be wasted on such failure and ugliness."

Ragyo turned toward the school, her smile growing. With her daughter returned, and Mako still safe in her grasp, her plan became much easier to wipe out the naked fools who slipped from her fingers. They would pay for that mistake, and Ragyo now had the needed people to retaliate at them in the right way.

She followed a now nude Satsuki inside, a hole-riddled Junketsu draped over one arm. Repairs must be done before its new wearer can don it, as the doors closed behind her, and the stale air of the empty Academy swallowed her she couldn't help but imagine the days to come, what they would bring.

Her daughter had returned, and she could use her for bait for her friends to return, knowing their near over-zealous loyalty to the failure that was her daughter. It would take them time, and time is what she needed. She needed to refit Junketsu, fix the Kamui back to peak condition, and fix its new bearer. Nui would oversee the repairs, and continue her work on her ultimate Kamui. Rei would keep together the company whilst she made sure of the Sewing Club's continued usefulness.

Her smile grew. Her plan could now begin its final stages.

Mako pulled softly at the bandages on her upper arm, looking at the stark white against her tanned skin. She didn't remember much of the fight, and she did not remember being injured. She knew she set off the explosions as Nui asked her to, and the power given to her had activated for a brief point in the large-scale fighting, but outside of those facts she did not know what had happened to Ryuuko, and the others who rebelled against Lady Ragyo's vision.

She looked down at the observation glass, seeing the dimmed room below. The dark chamber, lined in natural rock and supported by thick steel and support, was one familiar to the tiny voice in the back of her mind. The Time-Out Chamber, a place where the disciplinary committee would throw the students into if they did not follow rules or

abandoned the school. The tiny voice in the back of her head yelled and shrieked, but it was easily silenced and put away.

What mattered was who hung in the torture-like metal cage in the middle of the room. Stripped bare, hung by the wrists in rusting cuffs, was the heir to the Kiryuuin clan. Lady Satsuki's hair, damp from the constant drip of water from above, hung over her breasts and sex in a half-modest attempt of censorship, however it would not stay in that position for long. Lady Ragyo was due back from the restricted parts of the base any moment soon and would visit her daughter as always.

"Oh, Mako~"

Mako smiled as she turned, finding Nui standing a length away from her, arms outstretched for her. Mako gladly ran up to her, giving her the hug she always asked for when they met. She had gotten used to the blonde's cold touch as she hugged her back, her icy fingertips trailing over her shoulder blades through the fabric of her clothes.

"Missed me?" Nui asked, gently pulling herself out of their hug. Mako looked down at her feet for a moment before looking back at Nui.

"A bit. It gets lonely watching Lady Satsuki, and a lot of what Lady Ragyo does with her I know I should not see."

Nui giggled, patting Mako's head. "I knew you would be a perfect girl! It's okay, because I get to spend some time with you right now."

Mako's eyes brightened. "Really? You do? Lady Ragyo let you?"

"Yep, yep. Now, I want to ask you something before you get very hyper."

Mako sat down beside Nui in the two armchairs to the left of the observation window. "Okay."

"You remember Junketsu, right? The pretty Kamui Lady Satsuki usually wore?"

"Of course! She looked amazing in it when she transformed!"

Nui leaned in to her. "Well it's almost repaired."

Mako blinked, not responding. She knew not to respond when Junketsu was explicitly talked about. Nui simply wanted to brag about her freedom and the progress she got to see every minute she walked around. She smiled after a moment and nodded. Nui rested her hands on top of Mako's head.

"I'm happy that you joined me, Mako."

Mako giggled. "I'm glad too! You're the first friend that opened up to me so openly. Not even Ryuuko would do that!"

Nui stood from her spot, Mako quickly following as Nui pulled the brunette back into a hug, her lips pressed to her forehead. Mako repressed a shiver as her forehead took the full effect of the freezing touch of Nui's lips.

"I hope you stay safe, Mako. I wouldn't ever want to see you hurt."

Mako sadly smiled, tightening her hold on Nui. "I don't want to see you hurt either. Promise we won't see each other hurt?"

Mako held up her pinkie, and Nui smiled wide as she hooked her pinkie with Mako's, both girls laughing into a tender moment. As Mako settled into a long-winded rant on her boredom, the doors slid open and ending their conversation as the dim reflection of the rainbow shined over them. Nui calmly made her way toward Ragyo as Mako stood and bowed.

"Miss Mankanshoku... I see you have made a stellar recovery."

"Thank to you and your people, Lady Ragyo," Mako coolly replied, "Without your kindness, I would have died."

"Mankanshoku... follow me please. It is time for your next purpose."

Mako blinked three times before following Ragyo as asked, curiosity bubbling into her throat.

"Where are we going, Lady Ragyo?"

Nui smiled, but said nothing. Ragyo let a barely-there smile turn the corners of her lips up.

"It is your turn to don an outfit that fits you better than the rags you wear now."

Mako looked down at the red and white outfit, tugging at the scarf. She didn't mind the outfit much, even though it had a tendency to shift and change its shape sometimes. The COVER didn't agree sometimes with her orders, but it obeyed her most of the time. Nevertheless, Mako followed her superiors silently, trying to solve the puzzle laid before her. Nothing came to mind, but from the way Nui kept smiling at her, she knew it must be a grand occasion.

Ragyo stopped in front of a heavy, locked door which opened on her touch. Smoke belled out the bottom as the obviously temperature-controlled, sealed shut door. Mako peered around Nui, but saw little in the room before them. She still followed Ragyo and Nui into the dark room, few low-level lights turning on as they walked down the middle of the spacious room.

Several lights shot on as they approached a set of stairs, a spotlight illuminating a glass case slowly descending down. Nui came around to Mako's side, slowly pushing her up the stairs until the case came before her, and the heavy metal protection parted.

Inside rested Junketsu, eyes closed in stasis. Mako choked on her exclamation of surprise, turning to the waiting Ragyo and Nui.

"Nui has tailored Junketsu to you now, Miss Mankanshoku. It is your turn to don the Kamui." Ragyo told her, eyes narrowing, "Junketsu

will respond to you."

Mako's resolve wavered, her want of power, of control dipping under her sudden fear. She heard the stories of people being basically eaten by pure Life Fiber suits, and she did not want to end up like them.

Nui stepped forward. "Mako, you remember our promise?"

Mako nodded softly.

"This will guarantee that I'll stay safe. I won't ever be hurt when you wear Junketsu because you'll be stronger than everyone."

Mako heart hammered in her chest. Guaranteed safety of her new friend? Stronger than everyone, even Ryuuko? She turned back to Junketsu, and ran her right hand over the glass. It shuddered and parted for her, more steam bellowing down from the bottom.

Junketsu lay only a hand's length away from her. Feeling no fear, she undressed and kicked away the now useless uniform COVER, and reached out to Junketsu. The fabric felt like liquid in her hands, the silk-like texture and chilled surface sending shivers through her.

She bit down on her left hand, her right holding Junketsu, and held her bleeding hand over the Kamui.

Ryuuko slowly sat up as she came back to the world, hissing as a bruise on her side stretched. The battle came back to her full strength, and she found herself struggling to hold back her anguish. What Ragyo had told her... what she was...

"Ryuuko."

She turned to find Senketsu in a chair beside her. She blinked back tears. He knew. He knew what she was.

"Stay away."

Senketsu jumped. "Ryuuko?"

"How can you stand to be close me to when I'm... a freak of nature, an unnatural beast!"

"That's not true."

"The hell it isn't!" Ryuuko roared, "I'm... part Life Fiber, I'm a monster! I'm like Ragyo, I'm... a disgusting thing that shouldn't be alive! I can't be related to her, I can't be her daughter..."

Senketsu's scarves drooped. "Ryuuko..."

"I can't have her blood in me. I can't be like her..."

Senketsu draped one sleeve over Ryuuko's limp left arm. "Ryuuko... please don't be like this."

"How can I not? I had my heart ripped out and survived. Look at this, there's not a scar to be seen! I'm related to that rainbow bright bitch and..."

Realization surged into her. "And... I'm related to Satsuki... and she's under Ragyo's thumb again."

Senketsu stayed silent, tightening his grip on Ryuuko. A small, passive squeeze was returned.

"Senketsu... did Mako get out of there?"

The door opened after a series of soft knocks, breaking the tenseness between Kamui and wearer. Senketsu removed his sleeve and sunk back into the chair as Nonon and Mikisugi stepped in. Ryuuko knew something was wrong when they walked in, seeing that Nonon was snarking at her and a scowl was missing on her face.

"What happened?" Ryuuko demanded. Nonon sighed.

"Outside of the fact of the bomb Ragyo decided to drop, we... couldn't save Mako or Satsuki. They're still at the Academy."

Ryuuko let it settle in, bracing her head on top of her hands. The unsettling news of her blood relation to Ragyo and Satsuki, the failure to save Mako and the loss of Satsuki. This was a disaster. She looked up and knew that this time afterword would be horrific for everyone. Nonon had obvious signs of previous crying.

"So what now?"

Mikisugi stepped up. "You still need to heal for a bit-"

"I don't and you know it, get me unplugged from all these machines now."

"Ryuuko."

"You know I've already healed, now get me free *now*. "

Nonon raised an eyebrow. "Why in such a rush, Ryuuko?"

"I need to go somewhere, now. I need to see someone."

Gamagoori didn't move when his door opened, bothering very little with what the visitor saw of him. Even with years of emotional control and suppression, personal training and enough resolve to drown a man, he couldn't prepare for the mental and emotional toll in the aftermath of the fighting and failure. With the failure to rescuing Mako and the loss of Satsuki, his mind and heart held up only enough for survival.

He turned toward his visitor once he collected himself, and sighed mournfully.

"Matoi."

"I see that you're holding up about the same as me. Mind if I take a seat?"

Gamagoori scooted over in his bed, running his hands through his unruly hair as Ryuuko took a seat, turning her attention to the room around them.

"I'm surprised you're without your Kamui."

Ryuuko sighed. "I... can't wear him right now. Not with what that bitch did. It just doesn't seem possible."

Gamagoori looked at Ryuuko as her face fell. He did not know how it felt, but he understood her pain of feeling like the outsider, the alien in the world of normal people.

"So why did you come and see me?" he asked softly, not bothering to soften the rough edge to his words. Ryuuko looked toward him briefly before letting herself go lax, leaning on his shoulder, burying her face in his shoulder.

"I rather not have a mental breakdown in front of anyone else." Ryuuko mumbled, "Besides, you understand... well, everything."

Gamagoori gave a smile, and relaxed on to his bed, Ryuuko quickly following to join him.

"You know if anyone comes in, they'll get the wrong idea." Ryuuko mentioned as she opened her eyes, adjusting her position slightly. Gamagoori shrugged.

"They will deal."

"Heh, well at least we're on the same page; done with everything."

Gamagoori turned toward Ryuuko. "No. We're just overtaxed with the loss we witnessed. Mako, Lady Satsuki... your entire mission, my resolve..."

"Pffft, your resolve isn't dead. You're just showing the weakness you hide. Welcome to humanity, we have our weak points."

Gamagoori sighed again, sinking into the small bed he was given. Even though they were on land, they could hear water running underneath them. Ryuuko broke their uneasy silence.

"Thanks for letting me... be not me for a moment."

"Thank you for coming."

"Also, don't worry about me blabbing about this to anyone."

Gamagoori's brown crinkled, but he let the tension leave. He knew she evaded his privacy to ensure some security between them. He relaxed again, and moved to give Ryuuko some room.

"Thank you... Ryuuko."

Mako saw red. Pure, blood-red. Fire and rage surrounded her and her mind. Power surged through every vein and limb. Junketsu whispered of her power and skills, and she welcomed the fiery anger the alien combat suit fed her.

She was powerful now, more powerful than in her old, pitiful Two-Star Goku Uniform. She could beat up anyone, destroy anything, kill anything in her path.

All other voices drowned out outside of the sound of her pounding heart. All other emotions died under the powerful rage and anger that festered in her stomach. Orders from the flawless mouth of Lady Ragyo rang clear in her mind, her goals now in sight.

"It looks... amazing, beautiful. Mako, it fits you perfectly!"

Nui.

"Thank you, Nui." she thanked her, her gloved hands reaching out to the pink-clad icy beauty, "You made it fit like a second skin."

"It was nothing. You deserved it."

Mako could feel her body heat up at the kindness of Nui, her mind open to what she could be doing and implying. With an encouraged shove from her Kamui, Mako pulled Nui close to her, lips whispering over hers for a moment.

"You won't have to worry about Ryuuko or the others. They'll fall under my boot."

Mako sealed the thin distance between them, warmth colliding with cold as Mako stepped out of the cover of her old childish mind, to her new powerful one to kiss Nui to show her final changes. The other voice, the true Mako, screamed and fought but was as easy to flick away as a bug. As she drew away from Nui, she directed her attention to Ragyo who called for her attention.

"You wear it proudly."

"I wear it as it should be worn. Shall I find them, Lady Ragyo?"

"Find them quickly, and wound them. Cripple them."

Mako stepped back as the ceiling opened for her. "Anything for you."

Why Did It Change?

She saw her history replay as she flew away from the Academy.

She was born into poverty. Her father and mother worked to get higher, despite the lack of any financial help from anyone. They raised her well, even with her little brother becoming the troublemaker of the household, but his troubles helped them live comfortably in their lack of riches. It was a happy little family enjoying what they had, and making the best of it with the knowledge that getting higher would be pointless. They even had a funny looking dog, a pug picked up off the streets who would eat with such power it even matched her father's eating. They named him Guts, and gave him a hoodie to make sure they could find him. Her father worked as a back-alley doctor, helping those who could pay or help who he could. Her mother worked as a hand for hire until she gave birth to Mako's brother, and finally settled down as a housewife, taking care of their little shack.

She grew up to be a beautiful, well-minded girl. Not the smartest, not the hottest, but with the best outlook on life. She had her share of hardships, with her tendency for airheadedness and the constant need to sleep. She also seemed to attract bullies like magnets, who made fun of her size, her clothes which were last year's set. They made fun of her social standing, and always tried to make her feel bad for her body and breasts, which were larger than most girls her age. She did not worry about them much, and worked hard when she put effort out. Everything was well for her, up until her entrance to middle school.

Her family was murdered. Killed off in a possibly planned attack on her father who owed many debts to big figures. They came to collect on their lives, and took them without remorse. She discovered the smoldering remains of her house and family once she got home from her first day. Nothing survived, not even her dog who'd been shot in the head, execution style. She was devastated, unable to live the

side of her burnt mother for a long time, tears falling in inhuman rivers. She had been orphaned by greedy people with no heart or concern. With nothing but a broken heart, her schoolbag, and the thin clothes on her back, she trekked through the slums of her area in search of anyone willing to take her in, feed and house her.

No help came. She became an orphaned little girl with nothing. She stopped going to school, and searched constantly for a new home, but found denial wherever she went. She made temporary home behind the slums' small grocery store, sleeping in a metal box with a thin blanket to keep her comfy. The manager would bring her small food scraps to help her; it wasn't much but it kept Mako off the edge of starvation

Ryuuko found her two weeks after the incident, immediately taking her in without asking. Her family lived in a richer part of town, and it made Mako uncomfortable at first.

Her new family consisted on Ryuuko, her older sister Satsuki, their adopted sister Nui, and their dazzling mother Ragyo. Satsuki frightened her, but she was nice behind the scenes, away from the scathing eyes of her family. Ryuuko became her best friend quickly, seeing that she rescued her from death and had the perfect balance of roughness and sweetness. She liked Ryuuko, but Nui took the top of her list.

The sweet-and-spitfire girl was the nicest to her, and always showed her what or what not to do. She taught her how to help Ragyo around the house, and made sure she was safe. It was always Nui who came to her side if she fell or had issues with bullies. She helped her with school when she could, and let her use her clothes until Ragyo could outfit her with clothes of her own.

She liked Nui very much. The sister to top all sisters.

Ragyo also was her favorite. Her hair confused her, but she was a business woman with the greatest style. She held a hard hand over them, but she would be sweet to her, and show her things about her

body when she started exploring it. She would give her sweets for good deeds. and help her when she asked to cook.

Mako sighed in bliss as the memories blurred and bled away. She liked her life. It was a good one, a rough beginning but an ending that was that of a fairytale. From rags to riches and power.

She opened her eyes, and saw the wide expanse of water and the pile of rubble that once was Osaka on the horizon. She knew that they would be there. She knew not to directly hit them, seeing that she would be ambushed by many people. She would need to land somewhere open, somewhere where only a few forces could get in. Osaka was a wasteland now, so finding a spot wouldn't be hard. Something a little deep, rocky, maybe with perches...

She found her spot in the distance, and urged Junketsu farther through the air. The sound of wind whipping past her at speeds she would never know felt amazing, and gently stroked one of Junketsu's eyes. The Kamui did not speak to her, like Senketsu spoke to Ryuuko, but it gave an appreciating sound, almost one of approval of her actions.

She patted the protruding eye once and focused her attention back to the approaching land. She could see the collapsed Naniwa Sky Tower, and her head pounded as a memory she did not remember flashed in her eyes.

A pink Cadillac, matching outfits, and Gamagoori blushing as he drove her...

She shook her head of the invading memory. Gamagoori disgusted her. His over-dominating nature and constant need to put down others for his so-called 'Lady', Satsuki, made her want to hurt him. She knew he liked him, but his feelings will never reach her. She didn't having feelings for anyone really, maybe with the exception of Nui.

His blush as they walked side by side, their hands tangling together between them as they walk-

She shouted as she whacked away the memory, and started her descent, slamming hard into the ground in the ball of blue power surrounding her. Earth and dust surrounded her as she stabilized on the ground, taking her time to pull her embedded feet out of the ground. The small rise she landed on crumbled away as she freed herself, the dust not yet settled around her, shielding her from any eyes for a while. She looked around for a moment at where she landed, noticing that it rose above her like a stadium. It was perfect.

'Junketsu... make those memories stop. They are not mine.'

He moved a bit to show his answer, then stilled. Her mind felt lighter for a moment, and she thanks the Kamui for its quick work. It made a sound almost like it was surprised for her praise. She smiled and petted its eye again, watching it squint as she did so.

She looked around the dusty surroundings for a moment. She had really nothing to do until Nudist Beach showed up because of her landing, the 'identified object' that came on to radar. She took a seat on what was left of the tiny rise, and swung her feet back and forth. The dust would eventually settle, or maybe this part of town simply was dusty. It was getting windy, after all.

She knew what his plan was as they parked, and she immediately asked if it was true. He opened her door like the gentlemen he was and-

Mako hissed, and curled up briefly. Her heart hammered dangerously in her chest. What was happening, why was she seeing these false memories. Junketsu was as confused, his sounds turning into sharp chirps as he worked to help her calm down and to block wherever these memories were coming from. He took more blood, of course, but it did not bother her. She trusted the Kamui would not get greedy.

As she body relaxed again, she ran her hand again over Junketsu, thanking him for his continued work. She enjoyed the strange sounds he made, the confused and the excited ones that she earned now.

The ground rumbled under her bottom, and she stood tall and proud. They would be coming anytime now.

'Ready, Junketsu?'

A rumble of anticipation ran through the suit, and Mako gave a large grin. It was time.

Satsuki knew something had happened when the area around her shook. She shook gently in her chains, her feet leaving the ground for a moment before she straightened again. She knew that Mako had been led out of the observatory above her. She knew her mother had plans for Mako, to change her against her will. She knew it would wound her, Ryuuko, and Gamagoori, effectively knocking out at least two of Satsuki's biggest fighters.

She dragged her toenail against the ground again, repeating her task as she broke away the covers on her fake nails. She knew she had about eleven minutes until her mother would return, and play with her to try to break her, to have her submit to the delusion that she was her slave.

Another nail cover chipped away, the last one, and she went to work sharpening her big toe nails. If her plan was to work, they needed to grow, and sharpen to a deadly point. It would be easy with the material they were made of, but it would take some time.

She relaxed, and focused on her foot. She counted down the time in her head, and steeled herself for the return of her mother. When her timer went to a minute, she ceased her work and hung silent until she felt the sickly warmth of her mother's light cover her. Her eyes opened and her mother stood before her.

"I will assume that you felt what happened. Am I correct, Satsuki?"

Satsuki refrained from answering, her eyes turning to steel. She felt the impact on her bottom before seeing her mother move behind her.

"Answer me."

Satsuki stilled her arms. "Yes."

"It was a sight to see, Satsuki. You would have loved to see your friend become what she was destined for."

Satsuki ignored the hand slowly sliding down her side, the frozen fingers working their way to her behind. "She was destined to be a puppet?"

"For power, for domination. I simply gave her the way to unlock it, keeping her with me."

"She's become a puppet. No more, no less. You've ruined her."

A series of hits struck her bottom, leaving it stinging under the heavy hand that hit her. "Hold your tongue, you disobedient child. I am helping her see what will be hers in the end, the power she will hold with me."

Satsuki knew what she was talking about. "Shinra-Kouketsu."

Ragyo chuckled. "She is the only other human we know that can handle 100% Life Fiber clothing. What better energy source is there? She will be what you have failed to be all these years, Satsuki. She will be useful to me."

Ragyo's fingers dipped lower, and Satsuki calmed herself even as those fingers went to work. There was nothing different this time then the times before. She learned to be calm with this, even though the psychological hurt would forever be imprinted on her. She stayed still as Ragyo got her pleasure from her.

"She is surprisingly strong. Mankanshoku could at her best, in the uniform I made for her, could best you, my daughter. She could beat you and your little sister without issue."

"You have done nothing but hurt her."

"Oh?"

"She did not need a Kamui to best me."

Ragyo's other hand ran up her side, resting at her ribs. "So you admit your weakness, Satsuki. How disgusting. Where is the anger I know you have for me?"

Ragyo's incessant slapping continued, and Satsuki withheld her rage building. She knew she was doing this to make her mad, to make her react. She knew her mother saw her more useful when mad, and she would not give her the pleasure of seeing her angry. She took her punishment with silence and control, knowing that in one minute and fourteen seconds she would leave, and would not return until the dead of night to get her true pleasure.

The minute passed, and the door to her cage opened and closed, and she was alone once more. The heat disappeared, and the cold of the stone surrounded her, calming her from the flood of anger and emotion. She was alone with her thoughts. She immediately focused on the news of Mankanshoku's fate, and she couldn't help but worry.

She was going to end up inside Shinra-Kouketsu. She could not let Mako lose what she has.

She went back to her toenails, running the already growing nail against the ground. She would not fail herself, or anyone. She would get free.

Ryuuko kept her calm as she walked with the others toward the crash sight. She had the worst feeling that she would not like what

she would find there. Gamagoori, Nonon, Sanageyama, Hakodate, and Tsumugu joined her in the search party for the object that landed away from their base. Inumuta along with everyone else worried that it was a pawn of Ragyo's trying to hit them while they tried to recover, so they prioritized finding out what it was if it hadn't already headed for their base.

She knew that Gamagoori worried that they would find the thing they hoped not to see. If it was Mako there...

"So what did Inumuta say this thing was again?" Nonon asked, jumping over more rubble as they neared ever closer to the crash site.

"He couldn't detect what was entirely inside it, but it was human, and very powerful," Tsumugu answered, "It's obviously one of Ragyo's forces, so we need to be ready to fight."

Nonon accepted his explanation and the group went on in search in silence. Hakodate and Sanageyama would for time to time talk in soft voices, but outside of their idle chatter, it was quiet. Anxiousness surrounded them from all sides. They all had the same idea of who it could be, several important people taking the top of the list. They searched the wastelands of Osaka with little hope but they knew whatever landed was still out here.

"What if it is her, Gamagoori?" Ryuuko finally asked, unable to keep the question down any longer.

Gamagoori looked conflicted. "Then we fight to get her back, no matter what."

"Could you hurt her... could you even kill her to save her?"

"Could you?" Gamagoori rebutted softly, his eyes downcast, "Could any of us kill her?"

Ryuuko sighed, and continued on with the rest. Senketsu did not speak up as he usually would, knowing that things were still fragile between them. It was only the fear of someone donning Junketsu that had Ryuuko wearing her Kamui. He relaxed, but made sure he gave her a comforting squeeze to ensure that he still was there for her. Her hand stroked his eye, giving the Kamui some reassurance that their friendship would be fixed.

Their search brought them near the base of what was the Naniwa Sky Tower. The wind was picking up quickly, but they continued through the dust and destruction until they reached something that was not there before. A carter large enough to fit everyone into what looked like a bowl of cereal. They slowly made their way inside of it, one by one, through the small door-like entrances in it, and walked into the dust bowl inside of it. They shielded their eyes from the dust, but when it finally thinned enough to see through, their jaws dropped.

Gamagoori and Ryuuko gasped, their heart dropping. Their worst fears had come to life.

Standing in the middle, atop a raised pile of dirt, was a figure clad in what was obviously Junketsu. The three tailcoats whipped behind her, revealing little skin. The heels, so similar to Satsuki, clicked as they moved just enough for the person to rotate their body. The suit was skintight over her, making her figure more prominent. Although her back was bared, her front was covered besides the slits cutting through up to her breasts. When their foe completely turned, and they met her eyes which darkened upon surveying them, they knew who it was on the stop.

Gamagoori stepped up, unable to believe what he saw.

"Mako?"

She lifted her face, showing them her wicked smile, and faced her new foes with an aura of power. The eyes of the Kamui glowed dangerously, her gloved hands curling into lethal fists. Her voice was as cold as steel, but stung and burned like fire.

"Do I know you, disgusting giant Gamagoori?"

Their faces. Their beautiful, fearful faces. They all look astonished to see her, wearing the most powerful outfit like it was made for her. She loved their looks, it brought her pride that she could instill such emotion into these pitiful enemies. She loved Ryuuko and Gamagoori's faces the most. They look the most hurt, the most scared, the most fearful. Gamagoori looked hurt because of her comment, which was what she was aiming for. He had no right to call her by her first name.

"Mako, please..." he said again, and a vein throbbed on her forehead.

"You do not get to call me Mako! You have no right to!" Mako snarled, getting him to back up again. Disbelief filled his eyes, his form shaking just a little, but Mako could easily see it. She could see everyone's bodily reactions, the fear their bodies gave off.

"Mako, god dammit, what the fuck is wrong with you? What did that bitch do?" Ryuuko howled, stepping up from her spot.

Mako smiled, giggling softly. "They did nothing bad, obviously. They made me able to wear Junketsu, and saved me from disaster. You will never understand how I feel about Lady Ragyo and Nui!"

"What are you talking about?" Hakodate exclaimed. Mako made a disapproving sound, stepping down from her rise.

"They made sure I made it through life. They saved me from death, and starvation. I owe them my life. They became my family! And you are obviously not ready to understand, so die you filthy batteries."

Mako suddenly moved in a blur, and appeared in front of Hakodate, pulling out a blade from her back and hitting the tennis star across the face, throwing her across the crater, scattering everyone to get ready for her assault. The hole Hakodate created when she flew

through the hard packed dirt ensured that she would not be able to return to the battle, and she didn't have to take in account of the damage her hit had caused the girl. She didn't mind shedding a little blood. She dodged another attack from Sanageyama, quickly slashing at him, sending enough power into it to blast him back.

Tsumugu would be an issue in the future. His damn sewing needles hurt when they entered her but only a few hit their mark, the rest wasted into the ground as she dodged and ran, sending out attacks as she pleased. She saw that Gamagoori had transformed into his uniform, and it only made her happier.

"... that I... I love you Mako Mankanshoku"

Mako gasped as pain exploded across her temple along with the voice, the memory hurting her enough to stop her movement. She grabbed her head, willing her mind to stop conjuring these false visions. She roared out, keeping her enemies back as she fought herself.

"... I'm finally ready to say it, Ira. I love you."

"NO!"

She grabbed her other blade and sent up enough dust and dirt to shield her for the moment, trying to fight the onslaught of unwanted visions. They were not hers. She did not love that disgusting giant. She never liked him like that, she never had feelings for him, she hated him. She wanted to murder him brutally for having such dishonorable feelings for a better being!

She felt Junketsu take more blood, and a small, warped voice spoke in her head.

'Fight.'

Mako calmed, and her mind calmed. She could fight once more. She cleared the air and immediately went for Gamagoori, who went to

grab her. She dodged around his arms, slicing at him as she landed on her feet, twisting and turning in the air around him as he attacked. She bounced back, jumping up as he sent a whip at her. She landed above them, and she chuckled at their attempts to fight her. She saw red light envelop part of their arena, finally seeing that Ryuuko activated Senketsu. Finally, a fight worth while.

"MAKO! STOP THIS!" Ryuuko shouted, but Mako ignored her call.

"You are trying to hurt them. You never liked them, Ryuuko. You always resented them, hated them for what they did. I never understood why you did. So if I have to make you understand that they want to help by hurting you, I will."

Quick update! I know that we can't confirm if Junketsu can speak, but I like the idea that it speaks more through sounds than words. Senketsu was spliced with Ryuuko's DNA right? Junketsu wasn't, so no human communication!

Also, if you want to see what Mako looks like in Junketsu, check the link below out. Art belongs to artistictyranitar!

artistictyranitar]tumblr[com/ post/91917274686/please-understand-lady-satsuki-he-wouldnt-let (add the whole http thing, remove the square brackets, add periods!)

Also, please review! I love to see what you think about the story, and what you think I could improve, what to add, anything! Just review, please.

Bound to Death til We Part

She scared him.

She was alive, and well, but she absolutely scared him in that instance of reunion. This was not the Mako Mankanshoku he knew and loved. This was far from her, so far she seemed like a shadow of the true Mako.

"EVERYONE OF YOU! If you dare fight against me, you will all die," Mako shouted over the area, her smile wicked and black as her new soul, "If you somehow survive, you will end up like your lucky little queen, Satsuki."

This girl was the dark, unholy demon that took Mako's form. The Life Fiber puppet pulled by REVOC's strings.

"Now... who will try first? My best friend? My friends?" Mako asked teasingly, stepping down from the outer rim of the dust bowl, landing gracefully on her feet a level down. She turned her gaze to Gamagoori, smiling as spoke her next words.

"The disgusting, broken shield?"

Her smile grew as he flinched at her stinging words, unable to speak. Disgusting? Broken? The hand at his side clenched, anger simmering in his stomach. Mako is doing this on purpose, he told himself, she's trying to hurt you on purpose to get a reaction. Resist her.

"The manchild who loves me... how pathetic." She spat, spitting out a glob of saliva toward him, "The boy who couldn't let go of the fact that she was so far out of his league, he had to try this piss-ass attempt to free her from something that was saving her!"

He flinched once more, unable to stop from grinding his teeth. Anger now boiled up in his stomach, his nails digging into his palms hard

enough to draw blood. He had to keep himself from attacking. He must keep himself from violently reacting to her accusations and misconceptions, her replaced memories of him, so he did not feed the beast that she had become. Junketsu eyed with mercilessly, Mako following quick suit.

"The piss-baby boy who can't let go... you do not deserve your title as shield of Satsuki!" she shouted at him, stepping down until she was on the bottom floor, turning toward him. Everyone stayed where they stood, unable to act against her.

He could see Ryuuko shake in her uniform, all but barely clinging to the urge to most likely rip Junketsu off of Mako. He knew she wanted to free her as much as he did, if not more, but he knew as well that attacking her now would only bring casualties. They hadn't seen Hakodate since she was knocked through their arena, and their fears came to the thought of her death on impact.

"You deserve no title. Nothing." Mako giggled, stopping for a moment, "You don't even deserve what pitiful memories you have with me. Why do you think there are two versions of this tale, huh? Because yours is simply you thinking up a grand fairytale that rotated around you."

He bit back his sour rebuttal, but a growl deep from his throat responded for him. Blood dripped through his clenched knuckles. Mako's let out a loud cackle of a laugh, unable to hold back a wicked smile.

"Oh? Getting angry, giant? Let's see if we can hit the nail on the head. Why would I like you anyway?"

He saw his true Mako for an instance. The sudden brightness in her eyes. She was still in there, hidden behind the darkness. The anger stilled in her limbs disappeared, the darkness she shrouded her dispelling. She looked at him with large, saddened eyes, and for a moment he believed what he saw. Ryuuko did as well, until she spoke with pure, unadulterated venom.

"Everything I felt toward everyone; love, happiness, friendship. It was all one, big, LIE!"

Snap.

She heard them howl before they attacked, giving her the time to jump up into the air to dodge Ryuuko's blast, and Gamagoori's fist. Dust bellowed like a mushroom cloud below her, her cackling echoing around her with explosive sound matching that of a powerful bomb. Even through the dust, Mako could see Ryuuko and Gamagoori's angry faces, weapons stalled after their attacks.

"Both of you, what a surprise~"

She twirled in mid-air as his whips sliced up toward her, one wrapping around her leg and pulling back toward the ground. The weak spiked whip broke into pieces as she drew her weapons again, giving her time once again to bounce in the air enough to launch up again, turning her jump into a backflip, keeping her legs out of Ryuuko's range as the girl jumped through the air toward her, missing her by inches. Her snarl couldn't have been bigger, but Mako's smile couldn't have been brighter. With another timed swift dodge, Ryuuko missed her again with a heavy-handed slam of her Scissor Blade, her activated Kamui screaming her name while Junketsu growled in return.

"Keep trying, Ryuuko~. You missed me!"

"SNAP OUT OF IT DAMN IT!"

Mako easily dodged Ryuuko's next attacks, their weapons clashing together as Ryuuko made her attempts to shoot her back down on the ground, but with no success. They practically flew around over the arena, going toe-toe-toe to see who could land a hit before the other fell. Countless double jumps, defying gravity and physics as they skipped and jumped through clouds of dust and sky, Mako's unnerving laughter following her attacks and movement. Ryuuko's

attack were impressive and powerful, but they did not match to her strength and abilities now unlocked. She could jump circles around her as Ryuuko's emotions lagged her reaction times, Senketsu practically fighting for her as she failed another attack, giving Mako enough space to get above her, and send her back to earth with a well-placed kick to the back and a slam of her Needle Blades, making Ryuuko drop down like a wingless bird, slamming down into her new home inside her crater.

She dropped down back to the arena, and immediately spun into a backflip as Sanageyama tried to hit her, sending the bamboo sword into the wall she dodged behind. Without the hindrance of air resistance, she shot out of the spot, over him and kicked directly in the small of his back making him crumble to his knees. Even in the Goku Uniform, she could tell she did damage.

"You got weak, Sanageyama. Do not try such foolish, disappointing attack on me again!" She warned him, leaving him there. He was a worthless extra in her play with her once close people. She looked down at the arena and saw the brown mass that was Gamagoori's whip, easily dodging by leaning her head to the left, the attack meant for her collapsing the wall it hit behind her, sending her running around the level. Sanageyama, despite his injuries, dodged in time, running out of the arena. He knew they could not match her. She didn't need her senses to tell her Nonon and the rest had fled, most likely to get backup in this fight or to let those who matched her power fight.

She looked down at the bottom, spotting her prey. Gamagoori was helping Ryuuko out of the human-shaped hole she made making her crash landing, de-synchronized with Senketsu. She looked miserable, anger, disappointment, and sorrow twisting her expression.

"Is that all you got?"

Their eyes fell upon her as she fell down to their level, her smile widening as Ryuuko stood without his assistance, and brandished

her Scissor Sword. Fire burned behind the hurt in her eyes, turning the once calm Ryuuko into one of mad fury. Gamagoori rose to his feet, his Goku Uniform already activated. She could not see through his mask, but she could easily tell he was still upset and enraged by her earlier actions and words.

"Mako, stop this. Take that thing off!" Ryuuko demanded, "It's doing nothing but using you."

"Using me? It was made for me, silly. You never understood. Besides, now I'm equal to you. You and me could fight until we killed each other! Kamui versus Kamui, Hero versus hero."

Ryuuko growled. "I'm not going to go that far. None of us will."

Mako's smile grew, her eyes darkening to muddy brown. "And what if I kill one of you?"

Gamagoori did not see it coming. Her temporary boost in speed had her in his face, her weapon readied at the glass cover over his face. She could see the absolute fear in his eyes as she stroked the glass with one hand, before grabbing her weapons again, and bringing it through the suit, right through his visor and into his head.

Glass bellowed out toward her as she stabbed him, falling with his limp body to the ground, landing on his barely moving chest. She jumped away from him as Ryuuko send a blast toward her, dodging enough to find some space between them. Ryuuko was at Gamagoori's side in an instant, her voice screaming for him.

Junketsu gave her a series of happy clicks and growls, earning the Kamui a celebratory caress and words of praise.

"Down with the stupid big head."

"Gamagoori! Oi, Gamagoori!"

She couldn't see through the disaster that was his helmet. She couldn't tell if he was alive or not. She carefully pulled glass and shattered armor out-of-the-way, throwing it out around her and Gamagoori until she could see his face cradled within the shell of his helmet.

His face was mauled on his right side, blood dripping down from multiple cuts that dragged all the way from his neck. Glass and bits of broken armor embedded into his skin, bruises and burns lining each cut like clear flowers. His right eye barely closed, the cut running shallow through the eyelid keeping it slightly open and dripping blood and, what she could plainly see, tears. Visibly, he did not show signs of breathing, or consciousness.

She tore the broken edges of the mask away as best she could, trying to make more room so she could get closer to see all the damage, and to determine if he was murdered by Mako. Senketsu was squirming against her chest, trying not to panic as blood poured out on his top as she stretched over him, trying to pull the hood helmet back.

'Ryuuko...'

"I know, Senketsu, I know, just hold on for a little longer! Gamagoori! Wake the fuck up, pain for brains!"

The hood gave away, and she finally could actually touch him. She rounded behind him and slowly worked her hands under his head, starting to lift it up. He did not react, and his skins was getting cold. She situated herself so his head was lying on her knees, one hand brushing back his blood-soaked hair from the wounds. Barely any air moved through his lungs, his pulse slowly dying under her fingers on his neck. What little she could do to starch the bleeding did not help enough. At the rate the wounds spilled out blood, he would be gone in a few minutes.

"Come on, Gamagoori, you can fight better then this!" Ryuuko shouted at him, emotions running amok, "You've been hurt by much

worse. You can get up."

A sick, gurgling sound came from his throat, blood dribbling out of the corners of his mouth. Nothing more than a strangled, painful breath turned into a blood gurgle. She knew that he would not be able to respond, but it did not stop her from pointlessly filling the silence with her slowly cracking voice.

"I thought you were the impenetrable shield, but look what happened. You have holes in you, you idiot..."

'He's not going to survive much longer, Ryuuko.'

"AND DO YOU THINK I DON'T KNOW THAT ALREADY?!"

Ryuuko bit down hard on her cheek, trying to keep her calm. The emotional roller-coaster she rode was throwing her just over the edge, and she knew if she fell any further, she would be swallowed in by them. She ran her hands through his hair, hoping that he would react, but all that came was another gurgle. Her body curled over him, sorrow grabbing hold of her quickly.

"Come on, damn it, we're supposed to rescue Mako and Satsuki. We're supposed to see the end of this as friends, not as awkward companions. Please..."

The echoing clack of heels came behind her, stopping right behind her as Ryuuko slowly uncurled away from him, finding sickly warmth in exchange of deadly chill. She knew who it was, but she didn't care anymore for her, or what she would do. Her worry was aimed at the dying ally in her lap.

"So... is he..."

Ryuuko turned toward Mako with an angry snarl, nothing holding back her rage. "Don't you **dare** come closer! Look what you have fucking done!"

Mako stood where she was, a few steps from Ryuuko and the fallen Gamagoori. She could see the blood, and the broken armor, but she didn't understand why Ryuuko was so upset. She had obviously struck down Gamagoori, but she had done it clean, accurate, and perfect.

Until Ryuuko moved out of her way of the gorey remains.

At first, what she saw did not frighten her or create any reaction. It was the slowly dying body of an enemy to REVOCS and Ragyo, nothing more than a fallen enemy who deserved what came to him. Slowly, she found herself disturbed by it, eyeing the bits of metal and armor embedded into his face and neck, watching his blood waste in the suit and ground. Through her connection with Junketsu, she could hear his barely beating heart, how it just barely had enough to beat and pump. His weakening pulse pounded in her ears, her mind slowly slipping out of Junketsu's immediate control. Her hands shook at her sides as the view before her settled deep within her, past Junketsu's control, and into her heart. Her shoulders shook as the devastation of what she had done hit her whole, Junketsu freaking out as she reacted like herself.

"I..."

Ryuuko looked up at Mako with a cruel snarl curling her lips, not giving her any mercy of her heated gaze. Even as Mako backed away, hands covering her face as an anguished sound escaped her, she did not drop her hatred for the demon before her.

"What have I done?" Mako choked out, tears falling suddenly. Junketsu squirmed, trying to keep Mako under control, but the painful stabbing her heart was taking was keeping her free. She fell to her knees, her vision blurring before her as she heard silence fall, the weak beating of Gamagoori's heart disappearing from her mind.

"WHAT HAVE I DONE?! **IRA!** "

Nui was standing above her when she opened her eyes, the nightmare she witnessed immediately disappearing from memory. She was still tired from the battle, using her energy on a last attack with her Needle Blade's Dismemberment mode, collapsing the dust bowl she fought in and plunging Ryuuko and Gamagoori into retreat. Nui had gotten her out of there via helicopter and kept her from harm, coming to her aid when she found wounds on her. Small ones, but Nui jumped to the occasion to have her hands on her to help her heal.

"You don't even look tired from that battle. You're powerful on an entirely different level, Mako." Nui told her, helping her sit up as the last of her wounds healed. Mako shook her head, digging through the cobwebs to make out what was real and what was dream.

She had attacked Gamagoori, but did not kill him. He survived her hit, and immediately attacked back, actually hitting her and hurting her. Although she knew he didn't want to, he continued, Ryuuko following suit, pushing her to the very edges of their battlefield. Her anger and rage built up until she combined her weapons into an ultimate form similar to Ryuuko's Decapitation Mode, swung the large blade over her shoulder, and sent the attack down to the middle toward Gamagoori and Ryuuko, ending the battle and destroying the dust bowl, prompting Nui's arrival for her before she got sucked in to the now crumbling arena.

"Thank you Nui, although I do feel a little tired."

Junketsu's eyes looked up at her, gently constricting around her. Nui had taken it out of its battle form to let Mako recover better. The Kamui hummed and clicked at her, prompting Mako to soothe and rub the vocal sailor uniform until it calmed at her touch, returning to staring at Nui.

"Well, once we get back, you can sleep a bit! Just return Junketsu to the rack we installed in your room, 'kay?"

Mako nodded, relaxing enough to lean back on the helicopter walls, keeping a hand on Junketsu.

"Okay."

Halfway through the flight, a message came through from the Academy, and it gave no good news. Thanks to Nui's absence, and the business Ragyo had been caught up in, a small but illusive rescue party had infiltrated the Academy and freed Satsuki, and Lady Ragyo did not sound pleased at all, her words and volume growing darker and louder with every statement, and Nui looked ready to both kill something or kill herself, the latter only showing for a brief moment. Nui was forced to explain her actions in private in the cockpit, leaving Mako alone to find some shut eye and time to relax her suddenly agitated Kaumi, most likely from the anger that radiated from the speakers above by Ragyo.

The flight did not last long after the news broke, and Mako had fallen asleep, but woke up as Junketsu grew active again, his eyes narrowing and opening humming and growling echoing in her mind. She smoothed out his eyes and ribbon, the Kamui responding with a warm growl, and light tightening. She smiled and chuckled at him, starting a sound war with the Kamui until she had to stand and exit into the Academy. She was led away from her room and toward the tower elevator, and had to meet with Lady Ragyo before she was granted her time to sleep.

"You've returned." Lady Ragyo rarely gave off such excitement, and it made Mako smile, "Did you accomplish what I asked?"

"I have, Lady Ragyo," Mako informed her, bowing down, "I have crippled several of their forces, both physically, mentally, and in morale. I also encountered Ryuuko and Gamagoori, and took the brunt of my attacks."

Lady Ragyo clapped her hands together, a smile crossing her lips. "Excellent. Did Ryuuko and Gamagoori fall to your hands?"

"They appeared to have fallen, but I can not confirm it. If they did survive, my lady, they are severely wounded or close to death."

Ragyo hummed in thought for a moment, turning to her desk and picking up a full spool of yellow basting thread. It glittered, shifting from neon yellow, to dandelion yellow, to gold and back to its normal yellow. In it, without Mako knowing so, reflected Mako's feral expression from the battle earlier, bringing the smile to full strength on Lady Ragyo's lips.

"You have impressed me with your power and ingenuity, Miss Mankanshoku. You, indeed, are a powerful shade in our army. You have earned your recovery time, as well as bonuses fit to your status."

Mako chuckled, looking toward the windows. "You flatter me, Lady Ragyo! I simply serve to my best ability, and kill those in your way of Life Fiber domination."

Ragyo turned toward Mako, stopping in front of her and running her head down her chest, Junketsu reacting with calming chittering to the CEO's touch. Mako shivered, a chill running through her spine, but left before she could understand why she would shiver.

"It suits you so well. Junketsu has never had a better wearer than you, and he behaves and responds to you like he has known you forever." Ragyo murmured, her hands resting on Mako's side as she rounded the silent brunette. Ragyo ran her hands over Mako like she belonged to her, lingering on her breasts as Junketsu followed Ragyo's movement.

"I have never seen a Kamui and its human more in sync. Tell me, Mako, how does Junketsu feel to you? Do you feel how powerful he is?"

Mako sighed, matching Ragyo's gaze as she returned in front of her. "Unlike anything I've ever worn. Power runs through every thread in him, and his abilities are amazing. It's exhilarating how much power

we wield, human and Kamui. It still amazes me that I can understand what sounds he gives to me. I am in your debt for letting me wear such a legendary outfit, Lady Ragyo."

Junketsu chirped loudly at her, its eyes gazing up at her. She ran her hands over his eyes and shoulders, the Kamui giving a sound sounding like a sigh of relief. Ragyo watched curiously as the girl communicated with the Kamui without speaking a word to him, humming under her breath as the Kamui 'spoke' to her.

"Is it alright if I wore him a little longer?" Mako asked, looking up from her conversation with Junketsu. Ragyo nodded in confirmation.

"You two make a perfect team. However, find some time to rest and eat, my lovely Mako. You will return to battle soon."

"Of course, ma'am. Junketsu, I will not give you blood at this moment. It could dirty Lady Ragyo's office." Mako spoke to her Kamui as she took the elevator back down into the Academy, leaving Nui and Ragyo to themselves.

"She does look fabulous in it~" Nui hummed, sitting up on Ragyo's desk. Her legs kicked gently into the air as Ragyo rounded the desk, looking out over the sea, spotting the dust still bellowing from the land far, far away.

"Indeed. I also have never seen someone who could communicate with Junketsu so well. Never has such a simple human been so close to the Life Fibers and their amazing strength."

Nui giggled. "Mako is special! Besides, if it means more power and less self-control, then let her continue! She belongs to us now, and if she points her anger and pain and power at them, we won't have to worry about taking them out!"

"Keep her busy if she starts looking bored, or seems to be thinking. She must not break free."

Nui jumped away, skipping lightly up to the elevator. "Of course, Lady Ragyo! I'll go see her, see if she needs help putting Junketsu away~"

Ragyo let Nui leave before her anger boiled over suddenly, sending her spools spilling across the floor. If Nui hadn't gone for Mako, she would still have Satsuki! Those damned annoying fools had pulled a last-minute raid while Nui came in for Mako, leaving the Academy without their first line of defense, sneaking through the back and escaping with her precious daughter before she realized that the helicopter leaving was not her own.

"If they want that failure, they can have her. I have my key for my victory. They will never have Mako unless they kill her in the process."

"MOVE, MOVE! MAKE WAY NOW!"

Satsuki rushed alongside medics and personnel as they rushed two stretchers through the crowded halls of their base, blood following them like a welcome trail of rose petals for death. Satsuki had her voice bellowing as she helped wheel her comrades through the halls toward intensive care, her entire soul begging for them to pull out of this alive. Their conditions were worse than expected from the attack they took, and they barely held on to life. She had her freedom, but in exchange had her shield and sister dying as they returned from a scouting mission turned battle for Mako's return. She didn't even have time to thank Mikisugi, Nonon, and several others for their rescue mission before changing course for her closest allies.

"S-Sat... suki..."

She looked down to see Ryuuko's eyes opened, even though trails of blood fell from them. Despite the wounds covering her, however slowly healing they were, she could speak, her chest rattling as she spoke, liquid sloshing around as the stretchers moved. She tried to look at her older sister, but her body would not respond.

"I-is... h-he... gah-a-alive?"

Ryuuko could only mean Gamagoori, the other barely-there warrior on the stretcher beside her. Satsuki looked over at him, only able to see the disturbing wound alongside her head, nothing but blood and flapping skin and burnt muscles visible, but somehow through it all, he weakly breathed, his heart beating enough to keep him alive.

"Yes, but I don't know for how long." she told her new-found sibling, holding her tears back. She had no need for collapse. She needed to save them.

Ryuuko smiled, coughing dangerously powerful as blood burst from her mouth, hitting Satsuki's temporary outfit of simple white and grey.

"K-k-keep... him a-alive."

"I'm keeping you both alive. Rest, we'll fix everything up. MOVE THE HELL OUT OF THE WAY! WE HAVE FATALLY WOUNDED!"

She did not hear Ryuuko respond, her eyes closing again, her breathing more labored then before, blood still dripping from open wounds and everywhere where her internal bleeding could exit. Satsuki rushed ahead a littler further then the stretchers, screaming for people to making way for them as they rushed with superhuman speed to save their dying friends.

'Please... please let them pull through. We need them, Mako needs them more than ever.'

I'M SORRY FOR NOT UPDATING FOR A MONTH.

School started and I started working on several projects and fanfictions and lost some steam for this but it has returned. I realize the quick return of Satsuki is kind of out of nowhere, but I need some things up because I plan to wrap up quick, in four

or five lengthy chapter (bordering 5-7k words if my ideas permit).

But I hit 50 reviews! and over 100 favorites and follows! Thank you so much my beautifuls! Hopefully the next update will not take me a month ;-;.

Crossing Across Forbidden Lines

Satsuki hadn't left the ICU since they arrived nearly two days ago, working out of a small room to make sure she was within earshot of Gamagoori and Ryuuko. With their lives hanging on by thin threads, she needed to be there for them, no matter what. The abilities presented by Mako once inside Junketsu had her bewildered and concerned. Mako had power, yes, but she was far from that powerful. She could not nearly kill people like Ryuuko and Gamagoori so easily. There had to be someone else's hand put into this fact.

She could easily tell, from what data and video was collected, that Junketsu was using more blood than normal, even for the Kamui's normally extensive intake, to nearly triple Mako's built-in power. Still, even that much effort would drain Mako considerably, even in the end kill her, so the only lead left was either Ragyo or Nui manipulating or experimenting on Junketsu, or Mako, or both vile woman experimenting on both Kamui and Mako.

She sighed, tired of guessing what was happening, and set her tablet beside her. She rubbed her eyes, going on fumes of a total of four hours of sleep in a three-day period. She couldn't sleep with her sister and shield dying not ten feet around her.

Ryuuko was healing, courtesy of her Life Fibers, but she still could not breathe on her own without machine assistance, and had issues walking, talking, swallowing, stomaching anything, sleeping, and many other things. Her bones had healed correctly, and her muscles were showing signs of recovery, but she still had liquid in her chest and lungs, which was slowly being pumped out since most of the attention was on Gamagoori, who was still clinging to life with weakening fingers.

He wasn't in the ICU anymore, that was for sure. His condition must have taken a turn for the worst overnight that she didn't realize. She

snatched her tablet again and drew up Gamagoori's vitals, seeing that his heart had stopped working for a solid minute before starting again.

One whole minute. He was clinically dead for a minute. His brain stopped working, his blood stopped pumping.

Fearful shivers shot through her body. They had to make sure it didn't happen again. She sent a quick message to the surgeons awaiting her approval for their operations on him, and added urgency into her voice of her words before sending it.

Satsuki tucked the tablet under her arm and moved to the curtained-off room beside her, finding her sister sitting up with her shirt pulled up to her breasts, feeding tube sticking out of her stomach and coiling around her skin. Ryuuko quickly noticed her and waved her over. Ryuuko moved her oxygen tubes around, securing it into her nostrils, messing with her other tube coming out of her chest, which pumped the remaining blood out of her, before readjusting her sitting spot, and smiling at Satsuki.

"Hey." It was a strained greeting, but Ryuuko could barely use her throat. At least it was a sign of improvement from the hours and hours of silence besides the machines. Satsuki smiled, picking up the small notepad beside Ryuuko, writing quickly before handing it to her.

'I'm glad you can use your voice a little more. Have you been working on using it?'

Ryuuko gently grabbed her throat, releasing it once she felt comfortable. "Y-yes I have. S-slowly..."

"It's good to hear your voice again, Ryuuko." Satsuki told her, brushing a stray hair out of her face, "It still hurts, obviously."

"Yeah... but getting b-better. Eas..ier to b-breathe."

Ryuuko reached over and flicked the end of Satuski's nose, making the elder sibling lean away looking at her with a ridiculous expression, causing Ryuuko to laugh out loud, without issues.

"You still... a-are so tou-ouchy." Ryuuko hacked out before coughing roughly.

Satsuki brushed away her initial anger and sighed, knowing that she could not pick a fight with Ryuuko in her current condition. She let her tensions lessen for a moment, relaxing for the first time in two days. She rested her hands over Ryuuko's IV'd hand on her chest, giving leeway to a quick smile.

"We'll heal soon enough to get her back, I know it," Satsuki told her, keeping eye contact despite Ryuuko's eyes moving to the side, "But her amount of power has me worried."

Ryuuko nodded. "She's... t-too p-powerfu-ul."

"I agree, and with that power coming from unknown places, I'm worried that if these string of losses continues, Mako's going to die before we have any chance to save her and take Ragyo and Nui down."

Mako woke up much more tired than before, Junketsu's eyes moving frantically around the room as she sat up, brushing the Kamui's left eye to get him to calm. She had begun to find it more difficult to remove the uniform, not in the aspect that she couldn't pull it off but she found it harder to leave the Kamui sitting frozen in a box, its eyes following her, a moan of sadness echoing from it as she left it to sit in its place.

Junketsu was happy each night she turned away from the glass box, and showed its approval by taking blood, giving her a chance to relax and take out frustrations from dealing with work within the school instead of searching for and taking out Nudist Beach.

His sounds were one of alarm and fear, signals he gave only when frightened. She slowly stroked the Kamui as she leaned against the wall, trying to keep her eyes open. She was tired, absolutely exhausted, and ready to fall back asleep but she knew she had to keep moving. She spared the Kamui a little blood, and only after feasting on what she let him and a generous amount afterward, did it calm. With more blood taken than offered, she clawed at his eyes before ungracefully falling on to her back as a powerful dizzy spell stole her senses for a minute.

Would she have enough blood to fight now? Would she be able to use her legs? Junketsu had become greedy lately, but it kept the Kamui strong and herself stronger, despite the slight issues after blood giving.

She adjusted Junketsu once she recovered, twirling around in the skirt for a moment before walking out and reporting to Lady Ragyo for a brief on the day's events, finding she had nothing to do for the second day in a row. Due to Lady Ragyo's needs and whims, she would not be going out to demolish those in her way. She disagreed with the granted downtime but she knew never to vocally refuse an order. She left with a bored groan and a pissed off attitude. She wanted to do something, anything.

Junketsu squirmed toward an open door to her left; one she knew was one of the larger observation decks looking down into the repurposed sewing room. She saw Nui looking over the construction of Lady Ragyo's ultimate Kamui, looking as bored as she was from her exasperated sigh and being heavily balanced on her hands.

She could also do some *one*, if said someone was bored enough to indulge on worldly pleasures. Junketsu purred and growled at the idea, but Mako did not care for Junketsu's council in matters such as physical pleasure. She knocked on the door before sauntering inside, Nui's eyes evaluating her head to toe before she turned to her.

"Mako. I thought you were asleep."

"Nope. Woke up early, found out I'm doing nothing again. It's getting boring." Mako complained, leaning heavy on one hip, "Plus Junketsu's getting greedy and I wouldn't mind just running around naked for a while."

Nui's interests were caught like a fish on a hook, her smile growing. "Naked, huh? No undies, no bra?"

Mako smiled coyly, bouncing to her other hip. Junketsu gave a low sound, sending shivers through her. "Depends really. Who would see me in my birthday suit? The entire base? The Sewing Club members?"

Nui walked up to her and without hesitation, pulled her toward her, their faces closer than Mako expected. "Would you show me?"

With the amount of sultry undertone packed into those words, Mako knew she had Nui interested. With Junketsu rejecting the idea of her removing it, she silenced it, bridged the distance between Nui's lips and her own, whispering her answer as her hands fumbled to get Junketsu off.

"I would never say no to showing you."

Satsuki didn't expect Gamagoori to look so calm despite the chances of his death hanging open before him. No signs of blood or broken bones, no sounds of moaning or screaming, no semblance of damage. Yet underneath his bruising skin was still delicately healing wounds; one wrong touch and he could lose limbs or organs.

After making sure his heart pumped normally, and the risk of clinical death were greatly reduced, doctors put him into a medically-induced coma to let his body and his mind recover and rest. It was the only thing they could do for him now, after multiple surgeries to fix him from the ear pile of ripped muscle and shattered bones he came in. He couldn't breathe on his own, and much of his body needed nutrients and assistance to speed up healing and recovery.

She ran a gentle hand through his uncombed hair, pushing it back so it uncovered his forehead. He looked peaceful. His ventilator was showing normal numbers and signs and his tracheal tube looked good. The numerous other lines and IVs coiled around despite the peaceful hum of machinery keeping him going.

She hoped he would wake up, or at least heal. She didn't want to be the one telling Mako once they freed her-

If . If they freed her. If she didn't die before they tried, and if she didn't get killed before they tried. IF REVOCS didn't eliminate her before they tried.

If they don't kill her before they try to free her.

Too many ifs, not enough confirmation of action. She needed to make sure she could save her, for Ryuuko and Gamagoori, for her family now safe in Osaka, for her peace of mind. She sighed, running her hands through her hair, unable to shake the undeniable feeling of doom hovering over everything. She looked to Gamagoori again.

Peaceful as usual. She knew it wouldn't change anytime soon. She quickly left a reassuring squeeze of his hands before she turned and left. Staying there with a comatose ally was doing nothing good to her, but it kept her hopes that he would make it out alive. She absolutely did not want to be the breaker of news to everyone, including his family, that he was a vegetable and wasn't going to ever wake up. She calmly went through the metal halls of the base, watching those who passed turn their gaze from her; she couldn't tell if it was she looked angry or if they knew what she was going through.

She knew they did, but it still hurt much more. The command center opened for her automatically, Iori and Inumuta stood to salute and returned to work, their faces betraying their need for sleep and something other than loss. They had been on a long reprieve from

sleep since Mako showed up, and were early done with data sorting and path-finding, but they were ready to collapse on their consoles.

"You two should be getting sleep. The files are not going to be missing in the morning." Satsuki told them softly, looking over Iori's shoulder, "You've done wonderfully for us, but now it's your turn to rest and recover."

Iori sighed heavily, looking up at Satsuki as Inumuta took the offer, giving his thanks to her for the leave and waking out with a quick goodbye to Iori. Satsuki knew that Inumuta would most likely sort more in his bed, but at least he would eventually find sleep. Iori pushed away from the panels and turned his chair to her, eyes heavy.

"I was also able to ready several prototypes for the Two Star's Goku Uniforms. All I need now are facilities and the Life Fibers needed to make them, Lady Satsuki."

Satsuki sighed, and put her right hand on his shoulder. "Thank you for going beyond my orders, Iori. Get some sleep, please. I know what happens to you when you burn yourself up."

Iori smiled for a moment. "It's times like this that I would rather burn up than miss something important, Satsuki."

"Don't, for me please." Satsuki pleaded, "Go sleep. Get something to eat, take a shower, relax and get some sleep. I'll take the mantle."

Iori gave in with a smile as he stood with her help, briefly held on to her and walked out of the command center. Satsuki knew he would heed her advice, and she was grateful for him. She took his seat and opened up a comm channel with Mikisugi, calling him up. Within minutes, the glowing Nudist was beside her.

"Is there any good news on your end, Mikisugi?"

He looked conflicted. "We were able to clear out a portion of the base damaged, knock back a few forces, but we've lost more ground than gained. More schools are falling under your mother's heel than we can coordinate and save. Sanageyama lost his uniform today fighting with his gangs."

One uniform down. Satsuki nodded. "Thank you, Mikisugi. Get some sleep, we can worry about our assets later."

Mikisugi stayed where he stood, gently grabbing one of her shoulders. "You should sleep as well. We don't need another person down in the medical wards."

With those last words, Mikisugi pushed back his hair from his eyes, and walked out of the command center, leaving Satsuki alone. Once the doors closed, Satsuki slumped against the terminal, exhaustion taking her. Her exhaustion was not simply a lack of sleep but the stress from her sister and one of her closest friend's critical conditions, and the stress from the possibility of being unable to rescue Mako.

Later, she told herself, she would take care of it all later. She needed sleep before she had to be taken into medical. With a heavy sigh and reluctance weighing her down, she stood out of her seat and walked out into the base once more, heading straight for her room and to her bed.

Someone was running their hands over her side. The cold touch of a familiar hand drawing pointless shapes on her naked skin, her hands drawing down her thigh until they slowly trailed back toward her waist where the icy drawing continued, reaching lower between her thighs with a curious touch before withdrawing once more and resting around her waist and massaging her skin.

Mako knew who would do so and turned to her other side so she could see Nui once more, sitting up just enough to take the kiss she wanted from the blonde. Nui pushed her down into the bed again,

taking one of Mako's wrists and pinning it above her head, moving so she straddled the smaller brunette's hips. Mako dared not look until her lips were freed, swollen still from the first round's amount of lip locking.

"Thanks for the wake up call." Mako thanked, voice still saturated in lingering lust. Nui giggled, her hands trailing from Mako's wrist over her shoulders, teasing her breasts before lingering on her stomach, keeping still on her knees over Mako.

"My pleasure. Now, you look ready for round two."

Mako kept no hold on her heat, her smile betraying her eagerness to continue. Her boredom was long gone, replaced by flames of lust and passion far from whatever she dreamed. This time with her was unlike any fantasy, any instance of groping back in the Academy days. This was so much more, and she couldn't imagine what other possibilities lay ahead with Nui in bed. She dug her hands into the sheets, keeping her arms above her head as she went along with Nui's teasing touches and kisses.

"Round two, round three... just let me feel you. I want nothing more."

Nui's gentle smile gave way to lust, her lips biting Mako's lips before trailing down her face and neck, taking lovebites to her collarbone.

"Eager, aren't we?"

"Why wouldn't I? I feel... ahn! D-don't bite there... so hard."

Nui chuckled, drawing up to Mako's face to kiss her again, intoxication slipping through each one as Mako dove head first into her sexual lust, her sense clouding as her nerves and body's sensitivity skyrocketed, sending her through the clouds as Nui ravaged her and showed her what true pleasure felt like, and how much her body could react to each stroke and touch, each bite and kiss to anywhere on her body. Under the constant pleasure of Nui's

lips and tongue, and the building pressure in her lower stomach, Mako did not last long, letting the coil in her stomach snap.

Lying in the resulting afterglow, Nui cuddled up to her side, making sure her hands were all over Mako until they rested around her waist. Despite the fatigue tugging at her to sleep away the dregs of what lust lingered, Mako could not find the will to sleep. She gently moved around in Nui's arms, adjusting them so they did not tease her still. Nui, fast asleep and still gently shaking from Mako's reciprocation of her previous actions, turned and faced the other side of the bed, freeing the brunette from her unbreakable hold.

With her freedom gained, Mako carefully stepped out of Nui's bed, and paced for a moment. Something else was bothering her. Something, on the edge of her thoughts, bugging her and poking her.

Despite the cold chill in the room, she did not anticipate the chill running up her spine. Something was off, but she felt something familiar thrumming through her veins. Something warm, gentle, and kind. Unlike Nui's somewhat violent yet quick passion, whatever ran through her was the exact opposite, and it gave much relief to the claw marks in her back and shoulders.

Something dawned on her through the invisible veil keeping her from herself. A singular thought, nearly a memory, of what sparked the warmth flooding her blood.

'I promised someone, and that someone promised me that we would ask each other before we slept together. Consensual, blissful, and pleasant sex with this important person. Who are you?'

Mako knew what she and Nui did was consensual, and to a point blissful, but the claw marks and bite marks covering her shoulders, back, and neck denied the pleasant part of what her body desired. She looked back at the sleeping Nui, seeing the girl smile and adjust deeper into the bed, looking like a divine with her hair spread out over everything like a never-ending halo of blonde.

She felt the cold of the room as the heat of her blood dimmed. She didn't want to stay. She did not want to freeze at the touch of a girl who did not fulfill her newfound values. Without a sound, she gathered her undergarments into her arms, gently draped Junketsu over her arm, and walked through the empty halls of the cold Academy to her private room three doors down from Nui. Once there, she dropped her undergarments to the ground, and for the first time in a long time put Junketsu into its glass closet, blocking out the whimpers of sadness it gave her.

The hum of warmth returned once all was silent again, and she closed her eyes for an instance to stare at the image in her mind of a blank-faced male. The someone she promised; her mystery unable to be solved. She wanted to know what lied behind the white cover of this person. He was the reason she thought against what was instinct hours ago. Why she did not want the cold embrace of the step-sister who saw her for who she was?

"I need to know." she found herself whispering, opening her eyes and pushing away the warmth of the stranger's mental touch. With the room a neutral temperature, she found normalcy and relaxation. She crawled into her bed, a proud four-poster draped in soft blue and gold, dug into the sheets and blankets, and found peace within her falling eyelids, glad that sleep had finally found her.

'Please, mind... I need to know why he is here in my thoughts. Why is he suddenly here?!'

He mind, on the edge of sleep, showed her a glimpse of who he was. Blond hair and grey eyes. She needed no more, sitting up quickly and hitting her head with her fists, refusing such lies.

There was to be no thinking of such barbaric, disgusting, stalking men like Ira Gamagoori. He was a bug, a pest to be smashed. A human not allowed to survive, but to suffer till the end of days. He was to die for harboring such disturbing feelings for her, a higher being blessed with Life Fiber resistance rivaling even Ryuuko.

No more. No more. The room chilled, and Mako was finally able to topple into sleep, not once seeing the shimmering grey eyes of a man who fed warmth into her blood.

Morning broke for the forces, many still exhausted from lack of deep sleep. Satsuki did not push for much, but she pushed them to make sure that they would not falter enough to risk everything. Some grumbled against her orders, but they continued on with their jobs. She found herself sitting alongside her still sleeping wounded in the ICU, looking between Gamagoori and Ryuuko periodically.

Ryuuko was blessed with her Life Fiber healing, the bruising on her neck and face fading fast enough to trick the best person in believing they weren't real. She was improving every hour, and if she kept with the pace she would be free to breathe on her own and remove the tube sucking out the blood in her body cavity. She would have better mobility and finally work toward her final recovery.

Gamagoori had no approaching recovery date. His current projection for enough healing to move and act was too far to anyone to see, titled 'wounded and healing indefinitely'. He was still under in his medical coma, showing little improvement for a healing human. His ventilator was still gently going, feeding him the oxygen to breathe. He had some advancements in healing, but it was not working as it should.

Ryuuko's eyes opened, blinking several times before her hands brushed away the lingering exhaustion from her eyes. She yawned softly, moving to adjust her bed to sit up comfortably. She moved her cavity tube around for comfort, and adjusted her mask. Satsuki smiled at her as Ryuuko slowly pulled off the mask, and took her first breath on her own. She wheezed a little, but she could breathe normally. She chuckled roughly and cleared her throat.

"S-stale air... don't know... if I totally miss this." Ryuuko announced, "But free air... is nice. Can the chest tube... be gone with too?"

Satsuki laughed gently, taking the mask away from Ryuuko and adjusting the tubes in her nose for her, shutting off one of the air machines. "I'll talk with them, see what I can do."

Ryuuko gave a big grin. "T-thanks. At least I feel... a little better now. Does my voice sound l-like crap?"

"Not entirely," Satsuki told her, "but you could do better."

"You're an ass." Ryuuko announced, her smile falling when she saw Gamagoori. "How's he?"

"He's... he hasn't been conscious since he was brought in. He's had back to back surgeries, constant observation... he's somehow hung on but its looking bleak for him to heal anytime soon."

"He's alive?" Ryuuko asked, eyes frantic. Satsuki nodded, looking over at him again. Ryuuko, somewhat relieved he made it through, smiled, but it faded when she realized how close he obviously was to death. She looked over everything before settling back on to her bed, playing with the IV in her right arm.

"He's been a medically induced coma since his surgeries started, to let him heal. He's shown no signs of waking up since then. He's healing slower than we want, and at the rate he is he may not heal enough to survive." Satsuki further explained, "It's getting to the point that doctors are debating whether to pull the plugs and kill him humanely, or relying on faith and medicine we don't have enough of for him to heal."

"You are *not* killing him, no chance in h-hell. I will fight anyone who tries to pull the plug on him." Ryuuko snarled, "I think I know a way... to help him heal, hell maybe e-even fix him up."

Satsuki leaned back in her chair, folding her hands in her lap. She could obviously see the change between them before, but Ryuuko's denial of any hurt to him confirmed everything. She could pin their suddenly repaired and improved relationship on Mako, their

obviously embedded faiths to her, her health, and her survival. Ryuuko looked over to her for a moment, smiling for a second before frowning and looking back at Gamagoori.

"I know how to fix him."

"And how is that because all of us are getting desperate now." Satsuki asked, looking up at her little sister.

"I need to get over... to him. Get these tubes out of me."

Mako was waiting for him on the same cliff they had to run from on the day of the invasion, wearing a pure black strapless knee-length dress. She was facing the ocean when he walked up the hill, a soft hymn in the air. The mournful tune could be heard from the bottom of the hill, and it only hit closer to the crescendo as he got closer.

Her hair was shorter than when they met. It barely covered her head. He could see burn and bite marks all over the back of her neck and shoulders. Cuts and claw marks covered her shoulders, and what looked like blood coated her arms from the elbow down.

The mournful hymn turned dark and foreboding, angry in tone. The words in the air became sharp and shrill, the sky above them cracking and turning crimson red. What green around them turned to brown and black in an instant. As he looked around, he could only hear the shrieks of the dying below at the bottom of the hill. He turned back to Mako.

Mako was turning to him on the same hill he watched the slums burn down, wearing an angelic white, juliet-sleeved full length dress. Her eyes found his as he topped the hill, the cries of the dead in the air. The shrill shrieks could be heard from the air, and it only became softer as he got higher above.

Her hair was longer, reaching in her shoulders. He could see not a single blemish or scar on her. The white dress covered most of her

flawless skin, showing off the softness of her facial features and the gentleness of her smile.

She reaches out to him, as he drew closer, flames licking at his heels as the hill went up in flames. Yet despite the desolation and horror, Mako stood as the beacon of purity and happiness and hope, her smile brightening as he took her hand. She steps back toward the edge of the cliff, encouraging him to join her.

As her foot hits the cliff edge, he lets go. He stepped away from her in fear. Mako's expression turned wounded, reaching out for him again. The flames backed away as he did. Mako stepped away from the edge to reach out farther, but he did not come closer to her. She saw his refusal to get closer, and stopped her advances, clutching her chest as a wail escaped her, silencing all other sound. The sky opened again, this time spitting out an abyss of black, covering everything except for Mako.

Mako was turning away from him on the place of her death in a blood-stained petal-sleeved floor-length grey dress. She was turning toward the ocean of rosso corsa, her cries echoing in the absolute silence of the black cliff. The maddening sound was the only thing to be heard anywhere, no matter where he went.

Her hair was cut in a wild style, showing signs of force as a few bald spots spotted her scalp. Bruises the shapes of fingers wrapped around her neck, blood falling down large cuts along her collarbone. She had bruises on her cheeks, and marks on her hands and wrists.

Her cries soften only as she reaches the cliffside. Instead his ears ring until her cries turn into sniffles, and she looks back at him once more. She now has a left black eye. She turns entirely toward him, her heels kissing the cliff edge as the cliff cracks and buckles, and she starts to fall down. He rushes quickly to her, her injured right hand grabbing his left hand before she falls, dangling over the edge of the broken cliff which threatens to buckle under their combined weight.

Mako looks up at him dangling above death, her dress turning pure white for a moment as the air lightens around them, the red below them turning blue once more. Her hair is free of blood and at the right length. Her eyes sparkle as she smiles up at him, her cry of relief bringing him joy. She then looks down, and her face curls in sadness. She looks sadly at him before the red ocean flows again, and her dress returns to mournful grey.

She lets go of his hand, and plummets down, all the while her pure clear tears follow her down.

The sky cracks open, the blue sky and white clouds reappearing. The azure ocean flowed freely, taking away the red he saw Mako accept as her tomb. The ground below him repaired itself, keeping him safe above the gentle waves below. The grass returned to green, the tress blossomed in flowers. The soft hymn that welcomed him earlier returned.

He stood on the edge of the cliff, and turned toward the slope down to the bottom of the hill.

Mako was waiting for him on the top of the sloop of the hill, wearing a knee-length, spaghetti-strapped sapphire dress. On her head was a flower crown of forget-me-not, bluestars, and morning glory. She was smiling at him, the sound of bells echoing in the air as she reached behind her, pulling out something.

In her hands was the bloody weapon she had used to murder him. Her face is covered in shadows, but he knows what lies behind the darkness. His eyes close as he whispers his last love and goodbye. He embraced fate as she rushed at him with wild and fury-filled eyes, stabbed the weapon through his chest, and let him fall into the ocean.

The last thing he saw before hitting the waves of the ruby ocean was Mako in her grey dress, soaking wet and crying out for him as he hit the surface of the ocean, and sunk down into the depths of the water to replace Mako's place in the dark grave.

Ryuuko did what she could, and had to be helped back on to her bed. She had gone through hell to do what she did, nearly killing herself and making Gamagoori flatline twice, but she felt she did what had to be done to help his survival.

She was put back on to fluids and blood through her IV, and had the whole in her chest patched despite her healing doing most of the work. Satsuki was with the doctors who monitored her actions, most likely analyzing Gamagoori's condition at the moment.

She lay back, smiling as she felt her heart beat hard in her chest. She had this feeling that Gamagoori would be okay. She saw the nightmare play through his head, seeing him fear the cliffside, but she knew what the cliff meant for him. For Mako, it was death. For him, it was freedom.

With a final small prayer for her actions to work, she sunk into sleep. Her dreams led her down to victory with Gamagoori and her freeing Mako.

On the other side of the hall, Satsuki watched as Gamagoori's vitals immediately improved, as well as activity in his brain. He was alive, thriving, and healing at the rate they needed him to heal. Bones once in stitches and held by sheer luck were mending together, damaged organs and tissues were sewing back together. His lungs were strengthening. His heart was pumping normally again.

By the sheer stupidity, luck, and genius Ryuuko brought to the table, Gamagoori had a shot at being combat ready before they went after Mako.

I realize it's been another month but time really did pass without me noticing. School has be by the throat, and I'm struggling to fight a crap ton of writer's block especially with how I'll progress to where I want to be in this fic.

But I shall still continue writing this, and I hope you enjoyed this new chapter. If all goes well, in a few weeks or less another chapter will be out. If not, I'll be moving to a monthly release schedule for this fanfic.